

Become Tomorrow

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Become Tomorrow

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Summary

Wei Wuxian gets caught sneaking into Cloud Recesses.

But since he can't tell the truth - that he's just here to deliver his teacher's most recent love letter to her soulmate who's stuck in a cave - he tells a lie instead. He says that he's a Jiang disciple that had arrived late and so had snuck in through the gates. He hadn't expected the lie to work, sure that it would unravel as soon as they found a Jiang to verify it, but instead Jiang Yanli backs up his story, and even adds to it.

Which is how he ends up masquerading as the first disciple of Lotus Pier while trying to figure out how to get out of Cloud Recesses without anyone discovering that he's the disciple of Baoshan Sanren.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

started as a tumblr fic, but enough people were enthusiastic about it that here we are
chapter count is a blind guess at this point

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

At first, Wei Wuxian thinks that his mother has come back for him.

The first thing he sees is white robes embroidered with silver, just like Mama always wore, and he thinks that she's found him, that after months being on his own in the streets, of fighting dogs for watermelon rinds, his mother has come to take him home.

"Oh, A-Ying," says a voice that's almost but not quite familiar to him. The woman bends down and she's very beautiful, her young face at odds with her pure white hair. "I only just heard about your parents. I'm sorry I didn't come sooner."

"It's okay," Wei Wuxian says automatically, even though he doesn't understand what's happening or who she is. "Who are you?"

She smiles and holds out her hands. "I knew your mother. She was very dear to me. Won't you come with me, A-Ying?"

He looks at her for a long moment, then at her outstretched hands, and says, "Okay," before placing his hands in hers. He immediately wants to snatch them back, because they're too dirty to touch her, but she doesn't seem to notice that. Instead she grips his fingers and lifts him up, pulling him into her arms and smearing dirt across her perfectly white robes.

~

Xiao Xingchen knows that Master Baoshan only leaves the mountain for one reason, so he's not surprised when she comes back with a little kid in her arms.

He is surprised when he learns that little kid is Shijie's son.

It had been Shijie who'd found him when he was just seven years old, who'd carried him on her back up the mountain, breaking the vow she'd taken when she'd walked down it so that she could place him in front of Master Baoshan. He'd thought that maybe he'd see her again, one day, if he ever decided to leave the mountain himself.

Except she'd died, too young, barely ten years after she'd left the mountain and four years after she'd saved Xiao Xingchen. Shijie had seemed so strong for those brief few days he'd

known her. He'd dreamed of being as strong as her one day, and now she's gone, and it doesn't seem real, doesn't seem fair.

But there's a little boy who can't have been born much longer after Shijie found him and he looks around with bright, soft eyes that remind him a lot of the woman he barely knew.

"Xingchen," Master Baoshan says. "This is your brother. You are as responsible for training and caring for him as I am."

"Yes, Master Baoshan," he says, reaching out to rub some of the dirt from his face, although that doesn't do much for the dirt covering him everywhere else. "Hello, Ying-di."

"Hello," he says, then after a moment he tacks on, "Xingchen-ge," and grins at him, all dimples and missing teeth, and Xiao Xingchen loves him, then, as if he really were his flesh and blood brother.

~

Xingchen-ge has a lot of really strong opinions about leaving the mountain that he talks about at length whenever the subject comes up. He talks about how immortals have removed themselves from society for the good of all and how immortals' disciples have a duty to maintain this separation, to live in either one world or the other, about how one day their disciples all have to choose whether they'll live and die on this mountain or go and live and die in the land of mortals. This is all really awkward for Wei Wuxian, since he's been following the path down the mountain into town since he was eight.

"Should I not be going down?" Wei Wuxian asks Aunt Baoshan after yet another impassioned lecture that he ends up just nodding his way through.

Aunt Baoshan laughs and drops several coins into his palm. "Get one of those little cakes for me too and bring back enough chili oil to at least last us the month. Don't worry about Xingchen. He'll learn that things aren't so black and white in his own time. And to question where all our chili oil comes from when don't grow nearly that amount of chilies."

"Should I bring a cake back for Gege too?" he asks, looking at the coins his palms. It's too much, but no matter how many times he tells her that, she never gives him any less. They don't even need to eat, really. One of the first things Aunt Baoshan taught him how to do was survive off inedia so he'd never be hungry again, but even though Aunt Baoshan doesn't usually eat, she keeps saying that he and Xingchen-ge are growing boys that need proper meals and it's pointless to try and nurture and deplete their golden cores at the same time.

Working in the gardens is his favorite thing. Sometimes he thinks he could spend his whole life coaxing life from the earth and never get tired of it.

They eat meat often enough, especially once he gets really good at using the bow, but meat as spicy as he likes it is something he usually has to go into town to find.

"Unfortunately, I'm not a good enough cook to try and take credit for that one," she says, absently taking his hair out of its ponytail to retie it. "Now hurry along. Make sure you're back

on the path before sunset.”

“Yes, Aunt Baoshan,” he says, dutifully trading his white robes out for black like he does every time he walks down the mountain.

It’s one thing for him to leave the safety of Aunt Baoshan’s mountain, after all, and quite another for someone to recognize him as her disciple.

~

Baoshan Sanren doesn’t feel old most days.

She sometimes feels tired, but not old, thanks to the disciples running through her mountain and causing problems. Most of her children live and die on this mountain, and that won’t ever stop hurting, but she loves them, she gives them long, good lives that they wouldn’t have been able to have had she left them where she found them.

Cangse had been the first one that she thought she might be able to keep, the first one that had the potential to cultivate to immortality alongside her. Then she’d left, which had been fine. She was allowed to have a life bigger than this mountain, and she’d come back twice, to tell her that she’d found a man to love and to bring her Xingchen, and Baoshan Sanren hadn’t minded. Cangse was probably going to live for a long time, was going to visit her for a long time, so if she lingered in her new freedom and didn’t visit home enough, Baoshan Sanren wouldn’t hold it against her.

But then she’d died.

Her brightest pupil dead and gone and Baoshan Sanren hadn’t even heard of it in time to stop her and her husband’s bones from being scavenged by animals.

She’d felt old, then.

She’d felt her heart hardening, had felt the urge to slip into the harsh and uncompromising person she’d once been.

When she was a girl, in the true flush of youth rather than the facsimile of it she now wears, she had two friends who were too soft for their own good.

Wen Mao was bright eyed and gentle and spoke of building a clan that relied on the ties of family to defeat evil. Lan An had always been obnoxious, but he considered kindness to be a pillar of his character, and Baoshan Sanren had never been able shake him from his stuffy, reserved manor no matter how many times she threatened to shave off his beard.

She’d stopped aging long before both of them, and she teased them about that too, how it took them until they were nearly forty to freeze their faces in time while her skin was still unlined and her hair still black.

They’d gotten the last laugh on that one, at least. Her hair had turned white in the battle against Xue Chonghai, from the effort of containing the power of the Yin Iron long enough to kill the man who’d created it.

She'd had a lot of principles as a girl, a clear way of looking at the world that they'd shared. Good was good and evil was evil and evil was meant to be eliminated.

Then, when her dear friends had finally succumbed to age, either unwilling or unable to cultivate to immortality no matter how much she begged, she grew even colder. The world was changing and she wasn't and she didn't want to. All her power and skill and the long years looming ahead of her, and what was she supposed to do with it? She had no interest in starting a clan based on blood ties like her friends, had no interest in founding her own clan at all, really. It seemed like an awful lot of work, from where she'd been.

She spent a lot of time with the Wen, looking after Wen Mao's descendants since he couldn't, but she couldn't stand the Lan, mostly. Lan An had been fun when they were kids, at least, but his children seemed determined to be as boring as possible, taking his list of rules as commandments rather than guidelines.

Then she'd dragged herself to pay a visit, roughly a century overdue, and met Lan Yi.

Lan Yi was the first disciple, daughter to the clan head, and burned brighter than anyone else Baoshan Sanren had ever met. She was brilliant and argumentative, fascinating and beautiful, and she didn't leave the Lan for a long time after that, no matter how annoying their rule against drinking was.

The first time Lan Yi had broken that rule with her, taking a defiant sip of Emperor's Smile that made her cheeks flush, Baoshan Sanren had felt as if she were flying, that the point of her long life was to see Lan Yi with flashing eyes and a smiling mouth.

Then Lan Yi had kissed her with that smiling mouth, and her golden core had felt like a living flame beneath her skin. Lan Yi had cultivated to immortality nearly ten years into being the Lan sect leader. Baoshan Sanren had been so pathetically grateful that she wouldn't be alone, that the woman she loved wouldn't age and die as her friends had.

But Baoshan Sanren had learned that death wasn't the only way someone she loved could be taken from her.

Lan Yi had believed she could master resentful energy, had thought that Yin Iron held the secrets she was looking for, and her arrogance that Baoshan Sanren so loved meant she wouldn't listen no matter how wrong and dangerous her actions were.

Baoshan Sanren had once been someone who believed in destroying evil, and what Lan Yi was doing was evil, but she couldn't bring herself to destroy the woman she loved.

Lan Yi realized the truth, in the end, but it was too late.

The only way she could protect the Yin Iron was to fade away in a cave. Baoshan Sanren wanted to stay with her, to protect the Yin Iron with her, but Lan Yi refused, even warding her cave against her.

Lan Yi hadn't wanted Baoshan Sanren to give her life up to be with her, as if a life without her was even worth having to begin with.

But she couldn't force it, so she hadn't. She'd left her love to her cave and retreated to her mountain, having had enough of meddling in the affairs in a world she'd outlived, and that, it seems, was that. The end to their story.

Baoshan Sanren had resigned herself to losing everyone she loved, up until Cangse, up until she found and raised a child who might be able to gain immortality.

Then Cangse had died and it had felt like another punchline in a series of cruel jokes. What does her kindness and love get her in the end? Nothing but dead children and a cave she can't enter.

But she still has Xingchen, and Cangse had a child before she died, and maybe she can't save Cangse, but she can save her child.

She finds Wuxian, a small, helpless thing, and she loves him, just like she loves all the small helpless children that find her way to her.

He's kind and caring and brilliant, a type of searing brilliance that she hasn't seen since his mother, since Lan Yi.

She thinks that Wuxian could cultivate to immortality, if he wanted to, if he tries hard enough and doesn't die young. She wants to keep him selfishly at her side no matter what, to make sure she doesn't lose him like she lost his mother, but she knows that that's not fair, so she leans the other direction. She gives him more freedom than she'd given her other children, because he has to choose it, because he's strong enough that she can't justify giving him any less, and she hopes it balances out the way she works him twice as hard as she had her other children. She teaches him everything she can, all the forms from every clan instead of just her own style. The sooner he sees what connects them all, hopefully the sooner he'll realize what those connection mean for him, what the secret to cultivating to immortality really is. She wishes she could just tell him, but it's not something that can be taught, only learned.

She's old, even if she doesn't look it, and she should know better than to hope for more than she has, but she can't help herself.

~

When Wei Wuxian is eleven years old, Xingchen-ge walks down the mountain for the first time, but he doesn't plan to ever walk back up it again. Wei Wuxian clings to him, not begging him to stay because he knows that this is something that Xingchen-ge feels he has to do, that the way he can repay the universe for leading him to Aunt Baoshan is to descend the mountain and use her teachings to make the world a better place.

Wei Wuxian thinks that's crap. The universe didn't bring Xingchen-ge to the mountain, his mother did, and now he's leaving him and it's not *fair*.

He's too old for it now, but Aunt Baoshan lets him cling to her and hide his face in his shoulder as she rubs a soothing hand down his back. "You said he'd grow out of it," he snuffles, "you said he'd realize the world isn't so simple, but now he's leaving."

“How can he learn about a world he’s never experienced?” she asks calmly. “People have to walk their own paths and develop their own worldviews, Wuxian. You can’t do it for them.”

“But I’ll miss him,” he mumbles, wiping his tears on her robe.

“You have to let people make their own choices,” she says. “Even if that means they don’t choose you.”

That sounds like crap too, actually, but something in her tone of voice stops him from pushing it.

Months later, when he’s exploring the mountain on his own, he goes off the path like he’s very much not supposed to do, and he find something interesting.

It’s an old stone building, moss growing up the side. The door opens easily, as if it’s still used, which doesn’t make any sense at all, but what’s inside makes even less sense than that. It’s got nothing in it but a writing desk and several candles. Then he notices the walls.

They’re covered floor to ceiling with boxes. He reaches for the nearest one and opens it up, grabbing a piece of paper at random.

Dearest A-Yi, it reads, Xingchen mastered a new form yesterday and was so happy I wanted to embrace him, but he’s much too old for that now, so instead I just held his shoulders and said I was proud of him. I always think of you with your nephews when I do this, of how desperate they were to impress you...

Wei Wuxian shouldn’t read a letter not meant for him, but he’s not great at stopping himself from doing things, and it’s right there. He reads for hours, carefully searching for the oldest boxes without sending anything crashing to the ground. It doesn’t take long for him to figure it out.

It doesn’t take long for him to make a decision.

He sneaks away to read the letters for the next few weeks, just until he’s sure he has the information he needs, just to make sure he can do what he needs to do.

He puts on a black robe like he always does when he descends the mountain, tries to smile and not feel too guilty when he accepts the handful of coins Aunt Baoshan presses into his hands, and walks down the mountain like he has so many times before.

Except this time he doesn’t just go to the nearest town, or even the nearest city. He has to go further than that.

He’s going to Gusu.

~

Lan Yi has lived in the cave under cold springs with not a single descendent or disciple finding her for the hundreds of years she’d been here, which means she’s very unprepared for

a young boy to come tumbling down into her cave, soaked and shivering, not even wearing the robes of her sect.

She thinks it may be a trap, is almost willing to let her guqin kill him, when he staggers from the hit and gasps out, "I'm the disciple of Baoshan Sanren! Lan Yi, please!"

She slams her hand down on the strings, ignoring the pain as the energy kicks back through her body. "Is she hurt? Is something wrong?" She can't think of any other reason Baoshan would send someone here after all these years. She made a vow to protect the Yin Iron, has tied that protection to her presence in this cave, but if Baoshan needs her –

"She misses you," the boy says, stumbling forward until he can kneel in front of her. She flinches. He takes a pouch out of his robes and holds it out to her. "I took the oldest and newest I could find."

It could be a trick, still, but it's Baoshan. She has to risk it.

She's not going to sacrifice any of her rabbits and she can't exactly make a new one right now, so she reaches up and pulls off her forehead ribbon, lightly looping it around his neck to stop her guqin from attacking him and ignoring her discomfort at seeing her ribbon against his skin.

If he really is Baoshan's disciple, then he's as close to a child as she'll ever have, after all.

The pouch has two letters in it, both from Baoshan.

One is dated from just a few days ago.

The other is dated only a couple months after Lan Yi blocked her from the cave for the last time.

"She has a whole building of them," the boy says. "It looks like it's about every week, sometimes more. I know what you're doing is important, but she misses you so much."

Lan Yi doesn't realize she's crying until her tears smear the ink of the letters and she hurries to wipe them away before they can do any more damage. "I can't leave."

"I know," he says, sounding much older than he looks just then. "People have to make their own choices and walk their own paths. But you can write her letters, can't you?"

"They won't be able to get through the wards," she says regretfully. The only reason he was able to get through them was because he must have figured out the precise place to step and the exact amount of spiritual pressure to exert from Baoshan.

"They can't get through the wards on our mountain either," he says, and Lan Yi almost laughs at hearing that Baoshan has claimed a whole mountain for herself. "But I can. I can come to your cave and Aunt Baoshan's mountain and even if you can't see each other, even if you have your duty and she has her vow to not get involved in things anymore, you can have *something*. Isn't that better than nothing?"

When Lan Yi had sent Baoshan away, she hadn't wanted her to waste her immortal life in a dark, damp cave, had wanted her to forget her and live a full life and find someone smarter to love, someone who didn't think they could bend the impossible to their will. But instead Baoshan has a building full of hundreds of years of letters that she knew Lan Yi would never be able read.

She doesn't regret it, because Baoshan has gone and gotten a disciple brave and reckless enough to do the impossible, to sneak into Cloud Recesses and find her.

Which, actually. "How did you get past the gates?"

He winces and pulls a piece of white jade from his sleeve. "She still has the jade token you gave her." He pauses, then adds judgmentally, "Your decedents really need to update their wards."

She hasn't laughed in so long, but she's laughing now, big and loud enough for her stomach to ache, enough that she has to reach out and grab his shoulder to steady herself. Then she does something she never thought she'd do.

She writes Baoshan a letter.

~

Wei Wuxian has barely stepped onto the path leading up the mountain when Aunt Baoshan lands in front of him, jumping off her sword with her white hair flying as she runs for him. He takes a hasty step back, but Aunt Baoshan grabs his shoulders and shakes him, her eyes wide. "Where have you been? What happened? What were you thinking? Anything could have happened to you! Just because you miss Xingchen doesn't mean you can just go running off on your own!"

"It wasn't Gege," he says, interrupting her before she really gets going because otherwise he won't be able to get a word in for the next hour. He takes out the letter and Aunt Baoshan pales, reaching out with trembling fingers for the forehead ribbon wrapped around the scroll. He pushes it into her hands and says, "You can't give up on the people you love, Aunt Baoshan."

She cradles the ribbon wrapped scroll in her hands and says, "You idiotic boy. You're in so much trouble," before pulling him in to a too tight hug that crushes the breath from his lungs.

"Okay, Aunt Baoshan," he wheezes, hugging her back.

~

That's the beginning.

Every other month, Wei Wuxian travels the two days it takes to get to Gusu, delivers Aunt Baoshan's letter and spends the day with Lan Yi, then makes the trip straight back to the mountain with her reply in hand.

As he gets older, he starts making detours, starts taking a lot longer to get to and from Gusu. He explores new places, meets new people, and a couple times he has to hastily move on because he hears that Xingchen-ge is nearby.

He wants to see him only slightly less than he doesn't want to be yelled at by him. One day he'll come back up the mountain and then maybe then he won't be so mad when he finds out that Wei Wuxian has been going up and down the mountain since he was a kid. He'll definitely be *really* mad if he bumps into him in a random town in the middle of nowhere.

It all goes perfectly up until four years into it when he's sneaking into Cloud Recesses, like he always does, with two jars of Emperor's Smile – one for him and the other for Aunt Yi – and someone *catches him*!

Wei Wuxian would be angrier about this, except they fight to a standstill, him and this beautiful boy exchanging blows beneath the moonlight. "Who are you? What are you doing here?" the beautiful, infuriating boy asks, sword to his throat, and Wei Wuxian should be busy mourning his two bottle of broken wine, but this is a lot more interesting than that.

There a couple moves he could use to get himself out of this situation, but if he proves himself to be a threat, they may actually tighten security. Which he supports in principle, because their security is kind of terrible, but in practice that will get in the way of delivering love letters to his master's soulmate, and he's invested too much into this rekindled romance to see it all go down in flames just because some uptight disciple found him jumping across the roofs.

"I'm Wei Wuxian," he answers, mind racing. The foreign disciples should be visiting. Aunt Yi had mentioned it on his last visit. "I'm a guest disciple."

"Which clan?" he snaps, looking his black robes up and down derisively.

Oh, shit. Uh. "The Jiang," he answers and then has to resist the urge to wince. His father was in the Jiang, but that won't do him a lot of good with a bunch of disciples that are his age. Regardless, it's his best chance. If any clan would be willing to help get him out of this situation just for laughs, it would be the Jiang, although lying to help out a possibly dangerous stranger isn't really something a sane person would do.

If nothing else, he might be able to use their confusion to escape. If he can just get to the cold pond, he'll be able to hide out from them in Aunt Yi's cave. Maybe. Unless they manage to catch up to him there, and then he can't, because then he'll be leading them right to her, and her piece of the Yin Iron, and he can't do that.

It's possible he's a little bit screwed here.

~

Jiang Yanli has been in Cloud Recesses less than a day when she's summoned to Lan Qiren's quarters on her way to dinner. Jiang Yanli smiles at her sect sisters, grateful for the first time that her brother is on the other side of the grounds, and clasps her hands together inside her sleeves so no one can them shaking.

She enters, bows, and Lan Qiren says, “This boy claims he’s part of your clan. Wangji found him breaking in and he had *alcohol* on him.”

She blinks slowly, glad her face is turned towards the ground, then looks up. There’s not only Lan Qiren, but Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji.

Between them is a boy who can’t be much older than A-Cheng, wearing scruffy dark clothes and his hair in a disgrace of a ponytail. He looks at her, wide eyed and pleading, and she doesn’t know him but she feels her heart soften. He’s too skinny. She wishes she had something to feed him.

“Lady Jiang?” Lan Xichen prompts her.

She bows again and is speaking before she can think better of it. “I apologize for his disruption. Please forgive him, he is unaware of the rules of Cloud Recesses.”

“So he is part of your clan?” Lan Qiren demands incredulously. “Why didn’t he arrive with the rest of you then?”

That’s a good question. She should answer it. It better be a good answer. “He’s our new first disciple and there were several things he needed to arrange back home before leaving.”

They don’t currently have a first disciple. Mother wants A-Cheng to be given the position, but both Father and A-Cheng know he’s not ready for that yet, so instead they haven’t appointed one at all.

“I didn’t hear about this,” Lan Qiren says, glaring.

The boy steps forward, winking at her before all the Lans turn to face him. “My apologies, please let me introduce myself properly. I used to be a rogue cultivator, so I doubt you’ve heard of me, but I’m Wei Wuxian, the first disciple of Lotus Pier.”

“Wei Wuxian,” Lan Qiren repeats, pale and wide eyed. “Not – not Cangse Sanren’s son?”

No way. No *way*.

“Uh,” he blinks. “Yeah, that’s me. Did you know my mom?”

“You’re supposed to be dead,” Lan Qiren says, staring at him like he really is looking at a ghost.

Wei Wuxian glances at her, like he’s looking for help or maybe just for someone else to be in on the joke. “Well. I’m not.”

There’s some more awkward silence, and Jiang Yanli wants them out of there. The longer this goes on, the more likely it is they’re going to get caught. “If we may go to dinner, Master Lan? I’m sure A-Xian has had a long journey.”

She hopes he doesn’t mind the familiarity when they’ve just met, but it makes the whole story a little bit more believable, she thinks.

He doesn't seem to mind, instead lighting up and saying, "Yes, dinner sounds great. Shijie needs to keep her strength up, Master Lan, if you'll please excuse us. I really am very sorry about breaking the rules."

He doesn't sound very sorry, but Lan Qiren still seems to be in too much shock to call him out on it. Instead they're dismissed, no punishment doled out even as Lan Wangji scowls and Lan Xichen only looks slightly less surprised than his uncle.

Wei Wuxian waits until they're in the hallway to turn and grin at her. "You are literally the coolest person I've ever met."

She flushes, tucking some of his hair that has gotten loose from its tie behind his ear. "Don't get caught sneaking out this time."

"Sneaking out?" he repeats, then shakes his head. "No way, they'll totally figure it all out and then you'll get in so much trouble. I'll stay. Maybe I can get them to kick me out or something instead."

She pauses, because she likes him already, obviously, otherwise she wouldn't have lied for him, but. "I told them you were our first disciple."

"Yeah, I know."

When nothing else is forthcoming, she asks, "Can you ... pass as a first disciple?"

She'd helped him without considering the consequences, and if he disappears and the truth comes out she definitely will get in trouble for helping out a random rogue cultivator, but – she's heard the rumors, has vague memories of the fights her parents used to have. Cangse Sanren's husband used to belong to their clan, so Wei Wuxian is one of them, almost, and it's good that she helped him. That won't work on her mother, but her father will probably let it slide.

He looks at her and laughs, holding out his wrist to her. She hesitates, but he is offering, so she presses her fingers against his pulse and then he has to wrap an arm around her waist to keep her from staggering. His golden core thrums under his skin like a tidal wave, the bright, powerful rush of energy feeling like an endless well, like the deepest of their lakes back home. "I might need a refresher on some of the Jiang forms, but I wouldn't worry about that."

"Refresher," she repeats, looking at this boy that is supposed to be dead, who is the son of the famed Cangse Sanren and has a golden core stronger than any she's ever felt and who absolutely no one has heard of before now. "You know them already?"

"I know all the major clans' forms," he says carelessly and offers her his arm as they walk towards the dining hall.

She takes it, head spinning with an impossible thought. It's the only thing that makes sense, but at the same time it doesn't make any sense at all. She thinks she's right anyway.

He doesn't have the silver and white robes, and his sword has a basic wooden sheath, but nothing else can explain the strength of the core she felt beneath her fingers. No one could be that strong without anyone noticing, not even as a rogue cultivator.

Wei Wuxian is a disciple of Baoshan Sanren, just like the famous Xiao Xingchen, just like his mother.

She doesn't have time to overthink it, because then they're entering the dining hall, the meal just about to start. They walk over to where all the other Jiang disciples are clustered and all their eyes are on them, outrage hovering around the edges of A-Cheng's mouth when he sees her hand on Wei Wuxian's elbow.

"Our first disciple got in a bit of trouble," she says, smiling, aware of all the eyes and ears on them that don't belong to her clan. "A-Xian, you should really apologize to all your sect brothers and sisters."

Wei Wuxian goes into an elaborate bow. "This Wei Wuxian begs forgiveness and promises to do a better job of upholding the honor of the Jiang Clan."

There's a beat of silence where everyone looks at her, then to him, and she *loves her clan* because as one big smile comes over their faces and they groan, acting like this is another one of Wei Wuxian's antics, like he's familiar and one of them and this is just to be expected, really, as if they're not all seeing him for the first time. She sits down next to A-Cheng, dragging Wei Wuxian with her.

"A-jie," he hisses, "what's going on?"

"Ah, my dear sweet brother," Wei Wuxian says, sitting on the opposite side of A-Cheng and draping his arm around his shoulders. A-Cheng scowls but doesn't push him away or start screaming, so clearly she's not the only one who likes him. "We'll fill you in later, yeah? It's been a really interesting night."

A-Cheng ignores him to look at her, raising an eyebrow. "Really, A-jie?"

"Be nice to A-Xian," she says. "Our brother has had a long night."

He looks between them, waits for someone to explain and then clearly gives up, slouching into his seat. "Fine, okay, whatever."

The gong rings and there's no more talking now, as the food is brought out, and she serves both A-Cheng and A-Xian and they both turn to stop her, meet each other's gazes, and grin, united in maneuvering her back into her seat and putting food onto her plate.

She allows it, because she's had a long night too, but they better not get used to getting away with this.

~

Jiang Cheng thinks his sister has lost her mind. Everyone else does too, but they're having a lot of fun with it, probably because they're not the ones Mother is going to yell at. A-jie

outranks them, so if she tells them to lie about the identity of their first disciple and pretend that this random cultivator is one of them, they're going to do it.

It doesn't help at all that Wei Wuxian is fitting in like he really is one of them, laughing and joking. He's even really acting like a first disciple, observing the spars that break out after dinner and correcting the footwork of forms he isn't even supposed to know.

He gets put in the same room as Jiang Cheng, which at least means he's there when A-jie comes to see them right before curfew so he can yell at them both at the same time.

"This is insane," he tells A-jie. "Why do you care about him? You don't even know him!"

She smiles and says, "A-Cheng, be nice."

"Yeah, A-Cheng, be nice to me," Wei Wuxian says, which is so rude that he reaches for his sword, except Wei Wuxian just laughs at his outrage. But not meanly, not like he's making fun of him or mocking him. He leans over to knock their shoulders together, his smile still wide and friendly and not even a little cruel, and he feels most of his irritation draining away despite himself.

Most people either get mad or scared at his temper, but Wei Wuxian does neither, doesn't even call him out on it, just acts like they're friends and smiles as if it doesn't even matter.

"A-Xian is doing this to help me," she says. "If he just disappears, then I'll get in trouble. He's helping."

Wei Wuxian nods seriously. Jiang Cheng resists the urge to throw a pillow at his face.

"I don't understand why you even helped him in the first place," he grumbles.

A-jie softens and smiles at Wei Wuxian. "It just seemed the right thing to do. We'll figure it out. You'll help us, won't you A-Cheng?"

Wei Wuxian and A-jie look at him with identical pleading expressions, both of them very earnest and even more ridiculous because of it.

"Fine, alright, whatever," he says. A-jie pats his hands and Wei Wuxian throws his arms around him, which isn't the worst thing ever, he guesses.

~

This whole paper-thin ruse is the dumbest thing he's done in, well, ever probably. But it's also the most fun he's ever had, so Wei Wuxian can't bring himself to regret it too much.

In hindsight, he shouldn't have used his own name, but he really hadn't expected anyone to recognize it. It's just his luck that he'd run into one of the few people that had not only known his mother personally, but had also known she had a husband and son. Wei isn't usually a name that got recognized. He's been using it on the road for years and no one has ever figured out that he was the son of Cangse Sanren.

He should probably tell Aunt Baoshan about all of this, except that there's one problem with that.

Messages can't make their way through the wards on the mountain, and he can't exactly disappear for four days to go home and back without anyone in Cloud Recesses noticing, but he could get a message to Aunt Baoshan through Xingchen-ge. That would, however, mean coming clean about the fact he's been sneaking off the mountain for years and asking his sect brother to break his self imposed exile. After losing his hearing from how much Xingchen-ge would yell at him, Aunt Baoshan would kick his ass for telling him the truth just to send a message.

If Aunt Baoshan gets that curious about what's taking him so long, she can come and find him herself.

He doesn't think she will, but if she did, that would be pretty great, because he's pretty sure he could get Aunt Yi to lower the wards keeping Aunt Baoshan out if she were *here* and then they could, you know, catch up with each other in their cave or whatever while he continues to hang out with his friends.

Which is a thing he has now! Lots of them, even!

He'd met people on his travels, of course, but never anyone he had the time to get to know properly, not anyone as fun and interesting as all the disciples here. There are all the Jiang disciples, of course, and Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng especially. They're his absolute favorite.

But Nie Huaisang is hilarious and has a surprisingly strong golden core for someone who can barely hold a sword properly. Wen Ning reminds him of a little, easily startled bird and he wants to feed him bread crumbs until he trusts him enough to ride on his shoulder, which is an especially ridiculous metaphor. But at least it gets Wen Qing to smile at him after she confronts him about why he's spending so much time hanging around her brother. Mianmian is also really cool, and so far is the only Jin cultivator that he doesn't want to punch on sight.

Then again, Wen Chao is clearly the most punchable person here, so maybe he's not giving the Jin enough credit for not having Wen Chao. On the other hand, they have Jin Zixun, who's not much better, so.

He thinks that Aunt Baoshan would really love Mianmian, but she's too old and has too much family for Wei Wuxian to kidnap her and drop her off at the mountain, which is a real shame.

Then there's Lan Wangji.

Wei Wuxian thinks he might be his favorite, in a different way than the Jiangs are his favorite.

He's just so *angry* all the time. And suspicious. He's always watching Wei Wuxian, and has caught him the two times he's broken curfew to try and speak to Aunt Yi. He clearly doesn't believe that Wei Wuxian is really the Jiang's first disciple, which is rude and hurtful. It's also true, but that's neither here nor there.

Lan Wangji watches him in the library and glares at him in class whenever he gives an answer that Lan Qiren doesn't like. Which isn't his problem, he doesn't think. He's been taught by Baoshan Sanren, after all, what kind of answers do they expect him to give?

Except after he has that thought, he tries to give answers that sound a little bit more textbook. Because Lan Qiren knew his mother, and possibly has heard these types of answers before. From his mother, who was also taught by Baoshan Sanren, and he really doesn't need him finding the similarities between those two things. Hopefully he's chalked up anything he's noticed so far to him being Cangse Sanren's son rather than Baoshan Sanren's student.

The point is, even with the Lan's scrutiny and all the terrible rules, he's having *so much fun*. It can't last. As soon as he finds a way to leave without getting Jiang Yanli in too much trouble, he has to take it.

He just hopes that Aunt Baoshan and Aunt Yi don't get too mad at him when they find out. He's also doing his best not think of what will happen with all his friends when he eventually does find an opening to leave, when he abandons them all to return to his mountain and Aunt Baoshan and they don't know where to find him or where he went.

He hopes they forgive him too.

~

Lan Wangji can't decide what to make of Wei Wuxian.

A rogue cultivator being named first disciple is a ridiculous idea, but he *is* the son of Cangse Sanren, and her certainly *acts* Jiang, to say nothing of the close relationship he seems to have with Sect Leader Jiang's children. Jiang Cheng is notoriously difficult to get along with, with his only friend outside of his clan being Nie Huaisang, who's brother is known for having an even greater temper. Yet Wei Wuxian seems to get along with him easily, hanging off his shoulders and teasing him, never taking his anger to heart. It does not seem to be an affection easily faked.

He should be focusing on demonstrating sword forms with the rest of his clansmen, but he's run these drills a thousand times and to Wei Wuxian is where his mind wanders these days.

"Wei Wuxian!" Uncle snaps and Lan Wangji nearly drops his sword. "Something more interesting going on than learning Lan forms?"

Wei Wuxian looks up from where he'd been whispering with Nie Huaisang and rolls his eyes. "You only teach the basics."

Of course they do. As if they're going to go around teaching advanced clan forms to guest disciples even if they were capable of it.

"And you think you're above the basics?" Uncle demands.

"I think I already know them," he answers. "Go on, continue teaching, I won't distract everyone else."

But Uncle is staring at him now. “You already know them?”

Wei Wuxian nods. He’s barely been in Cloud Recesses a week and this is the first time they’re going over forms. That’s not possible.

Uncle makes a sharp gesture towards the Lan who are demonstrating for the guest disciples. “Go on then.”

He doesn’t back down, instead rolling his eyes and unsheathing his sword. He goes into place next to Lan Wangji, grinning at him as the drill starts up again.

Wei Wuxian does it perfectly.

His Jiang forms have been flawless, the smooth movements as he sparred against his clansmen leading more to his claim of being first disciple than anything else. Yet as he moves through one Lan move then another, there’s no hint of that. There is only sharp, perfect Lan precision.

“Enough!” Uncle barks. He’s staring at Wei Wuxian, and he’s not the only one. “Explain yourself.”

He pulls a face. “I was a rogue cultivator, I picked some stuff up. Don’t be weird about it.”

Uncle’s face goes a worrying shade of red, but before he can say anything, one of Wei Wuxian’s sect sisters asks, “How did you do that? Even when I get the move right, you can still tell I’m Jiang, but you looked like one of them.”

Wei Wuxian frowns, tapping his chin, before spinning away to stand at the front of the clearing. “It’s actually more about understanding the styles than something physical. Once you can do that, it becomes easier.”

He gestures Jiang Cheng forward, who sighs but comes willingly enough, unsheathing his sword and settling into an opening Jiang stance.

Wei Wuxian meets him, the two of them falling into a demonstration not unlike the one the Lan had just been giving. “The Jiang style is a conversation,” Wei Wuxian says easily. The fluid movements between him and Jiang Cheng seem to match that, their moves constantly adjusting for each action the other person makes. “It’s give and take and influenced by both the running river and the ocean waves. If a Jiang fighter retreats, don’t follow. Like the ocean pulling back, it’s only to prepare for a more devastating blow.” He does the opposite of what he says, following as Jiang Cheng steps back, and ends with a sword at his throat.

Jiang Cheng grins then pulls his blade back, sheathing it and stepping back into the disciples.

“The Jin style,” Wei Wuxian continues and Mianmian steps forward without even having to be asked, “is a dance.” Lan Wangji glances at his uncle to see if he’s going to do anything about Wei Wuxian taking control of his lesson, but he seems just as curious as the disciples. “It’s all about who leads and who follows.” Impossibly, Wei Wuxian slides into the Jin style. Lan Wangji isn’t an expert, but it seems just as good as his Lan forms. The whispering

happening among the Jin disciples supports that. He can almost see what Wei Wuxian means with the way he and Mianmian break apart and come together. He controls her movements with his own, then he goes from leading into following, forced into a more and more predictable pattern of moves as Mianmian presses her advantage until his sword falls to the ground.

She picks it up for him, handing it back with a warm smile that makes his stomach turn.

“The Nie style is a meal.” A Nie disciple stumbles forward after Nie Huaisang jabs her in the back with his fan. “It’s about consumption, about overwhelming your opponent until they break apart and there’s nothing left.” Wei Wuxian’s blows don’t have the same impact since he wields a blade rather than a saber, but it’s impossible to know that looking at his form. There’s no trading off of power, no adjustments made in deference of an opponent’s skills. There’s just a relentless, furious barrage of attacks. The Nie disciple knocks Wei Wuxian to the ground who grins and then says, “Defeat in the Nie style is not about subjugation, but subsumption.”

She offers him a hand up, bows, then goes back over to Nie Huaisang.

“The Wen style is smoke on the wind,” he says, and Wen Ning steps forward, giving him a smile that’s not nearly as nervous as the one he gives everyone else. “It’s about broadcasting one move to hide another. It’s quick and tricky and when a Wen wins you’re not going to notice until your insides are spilling onto the ground in front of you. Just as surprising and deadly as smoke in your lungs.” Wen Ning’s doesn’t cut Wei Wuxian open, but he does execute several seemingly clumsy moves that reveal themselves to be hiding clever ones, and it ends with his sword pressed to Wei Wuxian’s ribs.

Wei Wuxian claps him on the shoulder and Wen Ning ducks his head before returning to his sister’s side.

“The Lan style,” Wei Wuxian says and Lan Wangji is stepping forward, sword unsheathed, “is a war.” The description surprises him, but he doesn’t let it distract him. Wei Wuxian’s blows land perfectly and Lan Wangji should stay with the basic moves, but he has a suspicion, and he presses forward. Wei Wuxian meets him, counteracting him with moves far past basic and still perfectly executed. “Every Lan move is a finishing one. The don’t waste anything. Their beauty hides their brutality.” They’re going further now, Lan Wangji not holding back, and still Wei Wuxian meets him, still his blows don’t falter. “Lan only need one opening to end a fight. Permanently.”

Lan Wangji freezes, his sword pressed against Wei Wuxian’s chest. His blade would have slid between his ribs and pierced his heart if he hasn’t pulled the move.

Wei Wuxian is very close, his skin shining with sweat and his crooked grin doing something to the space underneath his own ribs.

This is all impossible. No one should be this good at all the clans’ forms, should know them this well, and yet Wei Wuxian stands here, an impossible boy.

Maybe he really is Jiang.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you liked it!!

you can follow / harass me at: shanastoryteller.tumblr.com

i'm also on twitter now (<https://twitter.com/shanastorytella>) and i'm doing a weekly newsletter again with a newsletter exclusive mulan story (<https://tinyletter.com/shanastoryteller>), if you're interested in that sort of thing :)

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jiang Yanli doesn't want Wei Wuxian to leave.

She knows that he's going to, that he's only sticking around now to prevent her from getting in trouble. She knows that even if they make it through the season at Cloud Recesses without getting caught, he's still going to leave after.

He claims it's to return to his life as a rogue cultivator, but Jiang Yanli thinks that he's lying. She thinks he's lying about a lot of things, but she doesn't hold it against him, she can't, even if she wanted to.

Wei Wuxian is a disciple of Baoshan Sanren, after all. Of course he isn't going to stay. Of course he's going to lie.

She doesn't have any proof, but she feels certain of it. Except he's not like Xiao Xingchen, he's not like his mother. He's planning to return to his master, somehow, even though she's always heard that it's impossible. It's the only thing that makes sense.

It's the only reason she can think of that he wouldn't want to stay with them.

If he really was a rogue cultivator, he'd have no reason to leave. He could join their clan and she could probably convince her parents to really make him their first disciple. He likes them, he's having fun and he's enjoying teaching them and spending time with them, and she wants to believe that if could stay, he would.

"Hey Yanli-jie," Wei Wuxian says cheerfully, twirling his sword around his wrists as he walks into her room, something that looks vaguely impossible. "You're late for dinner. Now A-Cheng will yell at both of us. And Lan Qiren, but I think A-Cheng's scowl might be a little bit better than his."

She automatically looks to the sky and notices how the sun is far too low and resists the urge to curse. "I'm sorry, A-Xian, I lost track of time. You didn't have to come get me."

"Sure I did," he says easily. "What kind of brother would I be if I let you go hungry?"

She's going to miss him so much.

~

Nie Huaisang almost buys the Jiang's wholes act and it's mostly because of Jiang Cheng.

He's known Jiang Cheng his whole life. He's *liked* Jiang Cheng his whole life.

Jiang Cheng yells and pouts and takes things too personally, but Nie Huaisang has grown up with Da-ge's terrible temper, so Jiang Cheng's doesn't mean all that much to him. Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes and complains but does eventually give in to whatever fun idea Nie Huaisang has come up with and then when he's gotten them into too much trouble, Jiang Yanli comes along to get them out of it with a patient smile and a bowl of excellent soup. What's not to like? The Jiangs are great. The Wens and Lans are nearly intolerable for different reasons, but the Jiang is a major clan made of very strong fighters who are also up for a bit of fun as long as no one they like gets hurt.

If Nie Huaisang didn't know for a fact that the Jiang all trained just as hard as the Nie, he might consider defecting. Jiang Yanli may already be engaged to Jin Zixuan, but Nie Huaisang could probably do something about that. He could do a lot worse than a clever wife that makes delicious food and a brother-in-law he already gets along with. It's too bad that Jiang Yanli actually likes her terrible fiancé. He supposes someone has to.

Well, there's Luo Qingyang, who's fantastic, but something has to be deeply wrong with her for to have been friends with Jin Zixuan for so many years. Maybe he's blackmailing her.

The point is, he knows the Jiangs, and he knows Jiang Cheng. Most people outside of the Jiang do not get along with Jiang Cheng, with himself being a notable exception.

Wei Wuxian hangs off Jiang Cheng's shoulders. He calls him A-Cheng and corrects his sword forms and never reacts to any of his huffy outbursts. It takes most people years to get that comfortable with Jiang Cheng and even longer for him to get comfortable with them in return. Jiang Yanli dotes on Wei Wuxian and all the other Jiang disciples obey him and joke with him. There's almost nothing suspicious about his claim that he's the first disciple of Lotus Pier.

Except, of course, that he's the son of Cangse Sanren that everyone thought died over a decade ago and no one has heard a single thing from since.

He's good. He's too good. He seems to know everything that they're being taught already, is open and friendly and offers to tutor anyone from any clan that's having any trouble. Nie Huaisang tends to be wary of people at first, even if he doesn't show it, but Wei Wuxian is so open and friendly that Nie Huaisang feels himself relaxing halfway through his first real conversation with him.

Even if Wei Wuxian had been going by a different name like some of the Jin cultivators speculated, he wouldn't have gone unnoticed. It's unheard of for a cultivator untethered to a clan to be as good as Wei Wuxian is without anyone talking about it.

Then there's the display of the sword forms, where Wei Wuxian casually showed off a mastery over every clans' forms that should be impossible for any one person to have, and yet he acts like it's nothing, like it's something that anyone could do in their spare time. Anyone who's spent any time training with the major clans would know how ridiculous that is, and someone can't be that good at the forms without training, no matter what Wei Wuxian says about just picking it up.

Nie Huaisang knows that they're all lying, that Wei Wuxian isn't really who he says he is and that he's probably not the first disciple to Lotus Pier either.

The only question then is what he's going to do about it.

Nothing.

The answer is he's going to do nothing.

He likes Wei Wuxian and the Jiang, and even if he doesn't totally trust Jiang Cheng's judgement, he does trust Jiang Yanli's. Whatever they and Wei Wuxian are up to, he doesn't think it's anything bad. Or if it is, it's probably something to do with them snooping around the Lan for some reason, which doesn't involve the Nie and therefor isn't his concern, and it's obvious that the Wen are the ones everyone really needs keep an eye on. Besides, Lan Qiren and Lan Wangji already seem to be keeping a close eye on Wei Wuxian. Lan Xichen doesn't seem to be that concerned, which really only validates Nie Huaisang's lack of concern, since out of all the Lan, he personally thinks that Lan Xichen is the smartest.

Jiang Yanli and Lan Xichen aren't worried about it, so Nie Huaisang decides that he's not going to worry about it either.

Instead he's going to see how much trouble he can convince Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng to get into with him before Jiang Yanli has to swoop in and bail them out like she always does.

~

Wei Wuxian realizes pretty quickly that he may have gone overboard with the sword demonstration, and he really didn't need Jiang Cheng yelling at him to figure it out. Apparently the Jiang demonstration had been fine, but he'd really pushed the bounds of believability when he'd gone through the rest of them. In his defense, Aunt Baoshan had shown him the other clan styles when he was a kid, so how was he to know that demonstrating them all was going to be such a big deal? He really could copy moves just by seeing someone else perform them, after all. His explanation had seemed plausible to *him*. How quickly he picks things up does seem to be the one thing that makes his story somewhat credible, so he thinks he should get points for that one.

Mostly everyone is being pretty chill about it, except for Lan Qiren and Lan Zhan, who seem determined to have eyes on him on every waking moment of the day. Which would be one thing, but he keeps on getting almost caught sneaking out at night, and intruding on his supposed to be sleeping moments just isn't fair. He personally thinks that he should be allowed to go sneaking around the grounds of Cloud Recesses if he wants to. He's been doing it for years anyway. Not that he can tell Lan Qiren that, obviously.

If he ever manages to get past his babysitters to speak to Aunt Yi, he's going to give her a stern talking to about having really annoying descendants.

"Um, Wei Wuxian?" Wen Ning is nearly his height but Wei Wuxian always automatically looks down before readjusting to look him in the eye. Something about the way he walks and talks always makes Wei Wuxian feel like he's shorter than he is.

“Yeah?” he says once he’s aware he’s let the silence stretch for far too long between them.

Wen Ning asks, “Are you okay?” and gives him a fretful look that reminds him a little of Xingchen-ge from when he was a kid and Wei Wuxian was determined to get into as many of the old buildings and climb as many as the rickety stairs on top of the mountain as possible. Aunt Baoshan just taught him how to fall properly but Xingchen-ge still followed him around trying to get him to not do dangerous things.

Instead they had just ended up doing the dangerous things together, which was probably at least a little safer since Xingchen-ge was older than him and had had a lot more training at the time.

“Yeah,” he repeats, again after a too long pause, “why do you ask?”

Wen Ning turns a little less fretful and raises his eyebrow in a way that reminds him of Wen Qing.

Speaking of. “Where’s your sister?”

Wei Wuxian is watching for it, so he sees his small, almost imperceptible flinch at the question. “Practicing her medical cultivation.”

“She practices a lot,” he says casually. “Isn’t she supposed to be really good?”

“She’s really good *because* she practices a lot,” Wen Ning says earnestly.

He hums but lets it drop, instead prodding Wen Ning into practicing archery with him again. He pushes it out of his mind until later, until he’s lying alone in a clearing, shielding his eyes from the sun and trying to think through all of the things that no one talks about.

Wei Wuxian has been off the mountain plenty, but clan politics are complicated in ways that he doesn’t have a lot of experience in. He’s been on a lot of nighthunts on his own, and even more of them on the mountain with Aunt Baoshan, and in spite of all his history lessons he’d thought that was the hardest thing about being a cultivator. He thinks the hardest thing might be this, instead, talking around the things that everyone knows and not getting too involved in things that shouldn’t concern him. It’s no wonder that Aunt Baoshan ran away to a mountain rather than dealing with any of it.

The Wens are up to something.

That’s not any sort of revelation or surprise or anything. Everyone knows that the Wens are up to something, because there’s no other explanation for them sending their disciples to Cloud Recesses after decades of not doing so. However, it seems like everyone’s attention is on Wen Chao, who is doing an excellent job of very loudly and obviously being the worst in every conceivable way. Just by existing he makes Jin Zixuan more tolerable, which Wei Wuxian personally find intolerable.

Wen Qing is quiet and reserved and he’s certain that she’s the one that people should actually be worried about.

Wei Wuxian has been spent years sneaking around Cloud Recesses completely unnoticed. He knows exactly how many Lan typically patrol Cloud Recesses and what their patrol patterns are, even during the foreign disciple teaching seasons.

There's more of them this year. And their patrol patterns are *different*.

That's a big deal. As far as Wei Wuxian can tell, they haven't done much to change the way they do things ever since Aunt Yi locked herself in the cave. The jade token she gave Aunt Baoshan still gets him access to the grounds and they're still doing the same sword forms. Aunt Baoshan will leave the mountain occasionally to brush up on any new moves that are going around. Every generation the Jiang style basically starts anew, constantly refining and improving and adapting. The Wen do a pretty good job make up new stuff too, and the Jin are at least creative even if they're predictable.

The Lan and the Nie don't change much, although Aunt Baoshan insists the Nie at least have a good reason.

He likes the Jiang style partially because it's the easiest for him to move in consistently without slipping up. Aunt Baoshan just calls her own personal brand of martial art the mountain style, which he'd always thought was a terrible name for it since it didn't seem anything like a mountain. It's smooth and adaptable, something that could almost be Jiang, but it's a lot sharper than that, like the Lan. It lent itself to customization with it's looseness, and even when he and Aunt Baoshan and Xingchen-ge all performed the same moves, they didn't look exactly the same doing it.

Wei Wuxian still can't risk anyone seeing him use it.

It was one thing when he stuck to border towns or even city limits, where the chance of anyone having seen either his mother or Xingchen-ge fight enough to recognize the similar style was nearly impossible, but here it's a lot more dangerous.

Xingchen-ge is really well known. More than that, Lan Qiren had known his *mother*.

If he starts throwing around moves that he learned from Aunt Baoshan, then someone is going to notice, and it'll be really obvious to everyone that he's a disciple of Baoshan Sanren. He's not sure what happens after that, but he's assuming that it's nothing good.

The point is that the change in the patrol patterns means that the Lans are on guard. It means they know that the Wen are only here because they're after something and they're not willing to let them have it. His guess is on one of the texts kept in the secret forbidden library, but since they'd need a specific musical cultivation sequence to unlock it, he's not sure how they'd get away with stealing anything from there without being noticed.

Of course, it's possible that they're trying to kill someone.

Unless it's something personal, which it very well might be, the obvious target is Lan Xichen. He's nearly at the age where he can fully take over the role of clan leader from his uncle, so killing Lan Qiren would only do so much to disrupt the clan stability. But killing Lan Xichen before he can take power would be a big deal, although the payoff seems rather paltry. Lan

Qiren would mourn, but he'd probably continue leading the clan as he currently is, and would continue to do so until Lan Wangji could run the clan.

The Wen could be planning on killing all three of them, Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji, but that seems a pretty ambitious for Wen Ruohan to entrust to his most obnoxious son or to his healer niece.

Maybe Wen Ning is a secret assassin. Wei Wuxian has seen stranger things.

"What are you thinking about?" Jiang Cheng asks, scowling as sits next to him. A moment later, Jiang Yanli folds to her knees on his other side, a basket of food on her arm.

Wei Wuxian gives the clearing a cursory glance to ensure they're alone before he asks, "What do you think the Wens are really up to?"

"A-Xian," Jiang Yanli sighs.

Jiang Cheng freezes then looks around wildly, as if Wen spies are hiding in the trees. Which, he supposes they could be, but it seems unlikely. "What are you thinking? Shut up!"

"Okay, look, we know they're up to something, right? And they know that we know that they're up to something. So I'm not sure what the point of the pretense is exactly," he complains.

"No one wants to be the one to accuse the Chief Cultivator's clan of actions unbecoming of their sect," Jiang Yanli says calmly while Jiang Cheng sputters. "It could quickly get turned around and used against us. So perhaps we shouldn't accuse them of things we can't prove?"

"We don't even accuse them of the things we can prove," Jiang Cheng grumbles. He knocks his shoulder into Wei Wuxian hard enough that he tips to the side and only doesn't fall over because he's pressed so closely to Jiang Yanli. "Keep those kind of thoughts to yourself."

He hadn't thought about that. From all the stories, Wen Mao had been a good man and a good clan leader. He doesn't know how all his descendants had turned out so awful.

Well, not all of them. Sneaky nefarious plans or no, Wen Qing and Wen Ning are pretty great.

"Okay, okay," he says and waits for Jiang Cheng to relax at his side before he continues, "but seriously though, what do you think they're trying to do here?"

"Wei Wuxian," he groans, but Wei Wuxian just laughs and doesn't complain when Jiang Cheng changes the subject.

~

Lan Wangji goes to the library in search of a particular book and finds Wei Wuxian sleeping in a patch of sunlight, a scroll abandoned at his side. He can't stand this anymore.

"How do you know the Lan clan forms?" he demands, towering over his prone form.

Wei Wuxian opens a single eye. Either he's a very calm sleeper or he hadn't been sleeping at all. "Hey Lan Zhan. What are you doing here?"

The use of his birth name sends a spear of fire through his stomach and straightens his spine. "Don't be overly familiar. It's discourteous."

"Aw, come on," he needles, shifting so he's on his stomach with his chin in his hands. "Aren't we friends, Lan Zhan? I'd like if we were friends. You can call me Wei Ying."

Wei Ying.

He swallows, his mouth suddenly dry. His voice comes out normally when he says, "Answer my question. How do you know the Lan clan forms?"

Wei Wuxian – Wei Ying shrugs, pushing himself up so he's at least sitting on the floor instead of lying on it. "You're not the first Lan I've fought against, Lan Zhan. I've picked stuff up over the years. That's what rogue cultivators do."

That's very much not what rogue cultivators do. Most of them are barely qualified to handle low level hauntings. Those that possess real skill are typically cultivators that have trained in a clan and chose to leave it, or who were taught by masters who used to belong to a clan themselves. "Who taught you?"

"My mother taught me how to form my golden core as a child," he answers and Lan Wangji refuses to have a reaction to that. Cangse Sanren died when Wei Ying was five years old. It's unusual for children to develop a core that young. Lan Wangji had. Maybe he shouldn't be surprised that Wei Ying had too. "That's the most important part. Everything after that is just practice."

"Where did you get your sword?" If Wei Ying won't answer his questions directly, maybe he can at least get something to go off of.

Except his face pulls back into a grin so large and bright that Lan Wangji momentarily forgets to have any thoughts at all. "I made it myself."

"That's impossible," he says automatically, because it is. The ability to forge cultivation blades can only be achieved after a lifetime of study and with impeccable control.

Wei Ying pouts before laughing. "Okay, okay, I only made the sheath and handle. That's why it looks like this. If I'd been older then I would have been able to make something better, with jewels or gold or something."

Lan Wangji looks at the rough, unadorned wooden sheath with the simple pattern carved into it. "I like your sword."

There's a moment of complete silence before Wei Ying opens his mouth, eyes bright and a smirk curling around the corner of his lips. Lan Wangji steps backwards, nearly tripping over his robes like he hasn't since he was a child, and walks out of the library as quickly as he can without breaking the rule against running.

It's Mianmian who interrupts his instruction of the Jiang disciples to let him know that Jiang Yanli had collapsed and had been taken to the infirmary. Wei Wuxian had started running before he consciously realized that his legs were moving.

He really wishes that Aunt Baoshan were here right now, because she knows a lot more about medical cultivation than he does.

"You shouldn't be falling ill so often with a golden core," he tells Jiang Yanli, who's laid out in bed looking too pale and too small. The woman who'd lifted her chin and lied to Lan Qiren's face shouldn't be stuck in a bed in the infirmary. This shouldn't be *normal*. How can he have been here for weeks and no one has even mentioned this to him?

She looks down and Jiang Cheng glares at him. Wei Wuxian doesn't take that personally ever, but especially not now, with Jiang Yanli being ill. "I know. But my core just isn't strong enough. I meditate every day, but it just – won't grow."

Wei Wuxian glances around, making sure there are no nosy Lan healers around, then holds out his hand. He's not Aunt Baoshan, but he's learned a couple tricks from her that he'd prefer not to demonstrate around anyone else. Jiang Yanli doesn't hesitate to give him her wrist and he presses his fingers into it, listening. Her core is there, of course, and it's small. But a golden core of any size should mitigate most illnesses. Even child cultivators are spared most sicknesses.

"Strange," he mutters. He gives her some of his own spiritual energy, watching carefully. It goes to her core and clings there, but instead of settling there and integrating properly, it dissipates.

That. Shouldn't happen. He does it again, just in case it was a fluke, but he gets the same result.

He leans over and picks up her sword. "Here, take this out for me."

She hesitates and Jiang Cheng snaps, "Shut up! Why would you ask her that when she's sick?"

"Yanli-jie can still use her sword when she's sick," he says, baffled. "Her golden core is fine, it's her body that's flagging."

Jiang Yanli shakes her head and places a hand on Jiang Cheng's arm. She licks her lips then squares her shoulders, looking him in the eye as she says quietly, "I haven't been able to unsheathe my sword in years. I'm too weak."

That doesn't make any *sense*. Her sword is connected to her core. Unless her core has gotten significantly smaller, which really should happen at all, then there's no reason she can't wield it. A sword increases in strength with its wielder. A sword should never be too powerful for its owner.

He grasps the hilt of Jiang Yanli's sword and pulls it free.

He nearly drops it.

"Fuck," he breathes. The cultivation energy held in it is so thick and concentrated that it arcs across the blade in purple sparks.

"Wei Wuxian!" Jiang Cheng roars. "What do you think you're doing?" He yanks the sword from him and Wei Wuxian knows he feels the same thing he does, watches his eyes go wide as he looks down at his sister's sword.

He and Jiang Cheng have strong golden cores, so they can hold it easily. Lan Zhan and maybe Mianmian could do it too. But anyone else would struggle.

"What's wrong?" Jiang Yanli asks, grabbing his arm. "Did it hurt you? Are you okay?"

"We're fine," Wei Wuxian says, mind whirling.

A cultivator's sword is connected to their golden core. All the spiritual power that should have been nourishing Jiang Yanli golden core has instead been absorbed by her sword.

He needs to speak to Lan Yi.

That means he really needs to get past the patrols this time. It's for Jiang Yanli. It's *important*. He needs a distraction.

Wei Wuxian waits until after curfew then sneaks out of the room he shares with Jiang Cheng once he's asleep. He goes down a couple of hallways before creeping into the room Wen Chao is sharing with Wen Ning.

They're both asleep and he moves silently, covering Wen Ning's mouth with his hand. He wakes up instantly, panic quickening his breath and widening his eyes. He gets halfway through reaching for his sword before he realizes it's Wei Wuxian above him and he freezes and then slowly tilts his head to the side.

Wei Wuxian steps back and raises a finger to his lips, giving Wen Chao's sleeping form a significant look. Wen Ning just nods, following him outside without a word. Wei Wuxian shuts the door behind them and says, "I need a favor. It's going to be really inconvenient for you, and I can't explain why I'm asking you to do this, but it's important."

He frowns for a moment before he says, "Okay."

"Wen Ning!" Wei Wuxian wails softly, grabbing at his face. "You can't just agree to things like that from people! What if it's something terrible?"

"You are not people," he says patiently. "You are Wei Wuxian and you would not ask me to do something terrible. What do you need me to do?"

He's so precious. Wei Wuxian loves him. Wen Qing is going to beat him black and blue for this and he's going to have to let her.

He sends Wen Ning off to distract the patrol guards, and he does not act like this is an insane request even though it is. Wei Wuxian gives him just enough time to attract too much attention before sneaking away himself, for the first time able to make a path to the cold springs without a suspicious Lan getting in his way.

The forehead ribbon that Lan Yi gave him years ago is already wrapped around his wrist to prevent her guqin from attacking him. He's lucky he didn't get searched when he got caught, because that would have been impossible to explain.

"Hello Wuxian," Lan Yi greets with the same warm smile she always gives him when he slips through the cold spring into her cave. "You're late. And empty handed. No wine this time?"

"Hi Aunt Yi, who I love and respect very much," he says earnestly. "Funny story about that."

The smile slips into a frown. "Why are you wearing Lan guest disciple robes? Someone is going to notice those missing."

"Funny story," he says again, because maybe if he just keeps repeating it then she'll believe it. He tells everything that's happened, from getting caught by Lan Zhan and claiming to be part of his father's old sect and Jiang Yanli covering for him, because she's awesome like that, and how he's spent the last several weeks pretending to be the first disciple of the Yunmeng Jiang.

She has her hand over her eyes, like she can't bear to look at him. This is why he likes her more. Aunt Baoshan would have already started beating him. "How did any of this seem like a good idea to you?"

"It didn't," he says. "I never claimed it was a good idea."

Aunt Yi lowers her hand to pinch the bridge of her nose. He's not sure if that's progress or not. "You know that if you go around making yourself known to the clan heirs and leaders of all the major sects, it's going to be a little suspicious when you disappear back up the mountain?"

"I did say that I was a rogue cultivator," he says, even though yes, it has. He hasn't really decided how to handle that bit yet so instead he's elected to not think about it. "Anyway, I have your letter from Aunt Baoshan, but it's going to be a while before I can get her yours. I need your help with something."

"It sounds like you need my help with several things," she answers, but she listens patiently while he explains Jiang Yanli's illnesses and the strange way her core and sword are connected. By the end of it, she looks as perplexed as he feels, which is gratifying, but not particularly encouraging. "I'll need to examine her myself."

He stares. "You can't leave." Her captivity isn't voluntary like Aunt Baoshan's. Her presence in the cave is the only thing protecting her shard of the Yin Iron. No matter how often Aunt Baoshan tells her to just bring it to the mountain so they can guard it together, Aunt Yi still

insists that she'd be betraying her clan by taking away the shard that was entrusted to them and she couldn't possibly go against the current sect leader like that.

Wei Wuxian is of the opinion that if Lan Qiren wants to stop two immortals from absconding with the Yin Iron, he's more than welcome to try, but no one ever asks him for his opinion about these things.

Aunt Yi doesn't roll her eyes, but it's a near thing. "I'm aware of that, thank you. You'll have to bring her here. I'll give you another ribbon."

"Bring her here," he repeats dubiously. "How am I supposed to explain that? How are you going to explain that?"

"How did she plan to explain away her decision to protect you when she didn't even know you?" she returns. "She trusted you and she didn't even know you. Now you know her and you won't trust her?"

"It's not about me!" he snaps, and his throat feels too tight and scratchy, all of a sudden, and water must be getting into his eyes because everything is all blurry. "My secrets aren't just my secrets."

"Oh, Wuxian," Aunt Yi sighs and then her strong arms come around his back. He resists only for a moment before melting into her embrace, pressing his face into her shoulder and letting her hold him like he's a little kid again. "I thought you knew better. You don't have live as me and Baoshan live. You don't have to choose one life over the other."

"If I tell the truth, then I'll be putting you and Aunt Baoshan in danger," he says. "I'll be making your lives harder. It'll make it harder for me to go home. Your lives are hard enough already."

"What's hard about my life?" she scolds. "I have the love of a good woman and a child of my heart. You are Baoshan's and so you are mine. Who would I be if I let your friend suffer just because I might be put at risk? I wouldn't be someone that was worthy of either you or Baoshan then."

His face is a mess, so he keeps it pressed against her. "Thank you, Aunt Yi."

"Silly boy," she says softly. "Do you like the Jiang? Do you want to stay with them?"

He tightens his hold on her, but she doesn't react. "I'm not ready to leave Aunt Baoshan yet."

She rubs his back and says, "Bring me Jiang Yanli first and then you should go home and talk to Baoshan. We had to choose once and I know that neither of us wants that for you. We'll figure something out."

Wei Wuxian doesn't know that there's a solution to this, no matter how much Aunt Yi wants there to be, but he doesn't say anything. He stays in the cave with her until dawn, telling her of everything that's happened on the mountain and the rumors he's heard of Xingchen-ge since he's saw her last.

Once curfew is over and the patrols have moved back to just the perimeter, Wei Wuxian sneaks back through Cloud Recesses, bouncing into bed and managing to nap for a whole hour before Jiang Cheng is shaking him awake.

~

Jiang Yanli is mostly recovered when Wei Wuxian slips into her room with a serious look on his face that she doesn't like. She hasn't known him long, but it's long enough to know that he's always smiling, so if he's not, it's something serious.

"I need to speak to Yanli-jie about something," he says.

The two Jiang disciples who share a room with her don't bother to even check with her before bowing and leaving the room. She thinks she should be upset by that, but instead it just makes her feel warm and content. Wei Wuxian has taken up the mantle of first disciple, of one them, so seamlessly that they all act like it's true even when no one's watching.

"What's wrong, A-Xian?" she asks, reaching out to push his hair behind his ear. The doctors want her to not spend too much time on her feet for the next couple of days, but there's no reason she can't drag a chair into the kitchen to get some cooking done. Wei Wuxian doesn't eat enough at meals because the food here is, admittedly, terrible, and he's going to be start losing weight if he keeps it up.

He puts her hands in between her own and she's really starting to get concerned when he says, "There's someone who I want to take a look at you. Someone who I think might be able to figure out why you're getting sick all the time. But you'll have to keep it a secret."

Her heart rate ticks up. He can only be talking about one person. "Won't someone notice that we're gone?"

She doesn't know where Baoshan Sanren lives, but she doubts it's close enough to Cloud Recesses that they could get there and back without being noticed.

Wei Wuxian's mouth drops open in outrage. "That's it? That's your only question? Yanli-jie! Aren't you going to ask where I'm taking you to, or what they'll be doing to you?"

"I trust you, A-Xian," she says honestly.

He starts muttering curses and even mentions Wen Ning for some reason before his back straightens and he says, "Okay, we're going to need someone to cause a scene for us so we can sneak out. They can't be part of our sect, because if they get caught you and A-Cheng are going to be summoned, but then you won't be there. I don't suppose you have any blackmail against Nie Huaisang?"

Her mouth twitches at the corners. "We don't need blackmail. I'm just going to ask him and he's going to agree because it's easier than telling me no. Besides, he loves causing problems for Lan Xichen. He and Sect Leader Nie are good friends, which means Nie Huaisang gets away with a lot."

Wei Wuxian almost feels bad about causing problems for Lan Xichen. He's just so nice. He'd been nice even when Lan Zhan had dragged him in front of them as an intruder. Luckily, he knows that Jiang Yanli is right, and Nie Huaisang thrives on causing problems for Lan Xichen. It's the only explanation for why he keeps bringing birds into lessons when he could at least leave them in his room.

~

Lan Yi doesn't know what exactly she was expecting Wuxian to do, but she can't help but laugh when he tumbles into her cave with a girl blindfolded and clinging to him while he holds her in his arms. The girl is holding both their swords pressed between their bodies.

"What was that?" she asks breathlessly before letting go of Wuxian so she can frantically pat him down. "Are you hurt? It seemed like we were getting tugged around but you were the only one hitting anything!"

"That was on purpose," he says, slowly settling her onto her feet and bracing her when she slips against the slick surface of the cave floor. The ribbon Lan Yi had given Wuxian last time is tied around her neck while his is around his wrist, as usual. He reaches out and unties the scrap of fabric he'd tied around her eyes. "Jiang Yanli, meet Lan Yi."

She blinks several times, her eyes adjusting to the light of the cave before she notices her sitting next to her guqin. "Hello," she says uncertainly, looking very young as she stands there wet and shivering.

"Hello," she says, equally soft. She holds out her hands. "Come here, I can't do anything to help you when you're all the way over there."

She doesn't move and Wuxian nudges her forward. "It's okay, Aunt Yi is going to help. She'll know what to do, Yanli-jie, she's like a thousand years old."

"Not quite," she says, keeping her hands extended.

Except instead of coming closer, Jiang Yanli turns motionless. Her lips move without making a sound for a moment before she says, "Lan Yi. Like – like *the* Lan Yi? Lan An's granddaughter?"

"That's me," she says patiently.

"But you're dead!" she blurts out before gasping and covering her mouth with her hands.

Wuxian starts laughing, because he's a terrible child, and she sends forward a quick bit of energy from her guqin that's just concentrated enough to get past the protections of the forehead ribbon. He stumbles and falls back into the water. Jiang Yanli bends down to help him, but he pushes himself up still laughing and wraps a damp arm around her shoulders. "She's not dead, it's okay. She's not a ghost or anything, just old."

"A-Xian!" Jiang Yanli hisses before falling into a deep, formal bow. "Lady Lan. It's an honor to meet you."

“Thank you,” she says, “but that’s really unnecessary. You’re a friend of Wuxian and that means you’re a friend of mine. Please come closer. He tells me that you fall ill often?”

“Yes,” she says, finally coming closer. Wei Wuxian hovers behind her until she’s close enough for Lan Yi to take her arm. Then he sits on the ground close enough to the guqin to pluck at it absently. She’s taught him to play over the years, but he only practices when he’s with her, so he’s not as good at it as he could be. “It’s happened ever since I was a child. It doesn’t usually last long and it happens less now.”

She nods and pulls up Jiang Yanli’s sleeve to her elbows, shifting her arm so her wrist is turned upward. “May I?”

Jiang Yanli nods, not hesitating even though her face is a mix of awe and fear, and Lan Yi can’t help but like her. She’s the only person that Lan Yi has met besides Wuxian for so long, and she’s someone who protected Wuxian and Lan Yi is going to do her best to return her kindness with her own.

She presses her fingers against Jiang Yanli’s wrist. It takes her only a moment to confirm what Wuxian had told her, that the girl’s core is small but very there, and strong enough that she should be immune to most minor illnesses rather than highly susceptible to them. She repeats the experiment Wuxian had and pushes a small amount of her spiritual energy into her core. However, Lan Yi is a lot more sensitive to the shifts of a spiritual energy than Wuxian is. It’s a skill that comes with time, and she’s had little else.

Wuxian had said that the spiritual energy had clung there for a moment before it disappeared, but that’s not quite right. Everyone’s spiritual energy is slightly different and bodies aren’t meant to make use of energy different than their own. When foreign spiritual energy is introduced, the core processes it in order to make use of it. It happens without conscious thought and is something even the cores of children do.

Except Jiang Yanli’s core does something different.

Her core converts it into a spiritual energy incompatible with her own and then that spiritual energy is pushed outside of her body, is rejected as something foreign and different.

“Can I see your sword?” she asks, a suspicion already forming in her mind.

Jiang Yanli holds it out to her, her face pinched in worry. Lan Yi smooths her own expression, giving her a reassuring smile before grabbing it and unsheathing the blade.

Impressive.

She swings the sword through the air, noting with approval the crackle of energy going down the blade. She reaches for Jiang Yanli’s wrist once more and sends another trickle of spiritual energy into her core. A moment later that same trickle arcs across the sword in a shower of purple sparks.

Lan Yi thinks she knows what happened, although it will be impossible to know for sure without the girl’s parents. Either way, she believes she knows how to fix it, but it’s

dangerous, and even if she succeeds, she doubts that Jiang Yanli will ever have a golden core strong enough to wield her own blade.

She wishes Baoshan were here. Perhaps it would be better if Wuxian brings Jiang Yanli to the mountain. Baoshan has seen more of the world than her and will know for sure, and has a lot more experience with medical cultivation than she does. Although, Lan Yi's past attempts at manipulating resentful energy might give her an edge over Baoshan when it comes to doing this correctly.

It's not something that can be attempted tonight at any rate. Jiang Yanli will need at least a couple weeks to recover and the eldest child to the Jiang sect being bedbound for that long will garner too much attention and cause too many rumors that she's assuming her clan won't want to answer.

"Aunt Yi?" Wuxian asks, his hands paused over her guqin and his eyebrows pushed together. "Is everything alright?"

She smiles, resheathing the sword and patting Jiang Yanli's hands, trying to figure out a way to say all the things she needs to without alarming either her or Wuxian.

Her thoughts are interrupted by someone else tumbling into the cave. Lan Yi reaches for her own sword but her guqin comes to life first, letting out a battering ram of energy at the intruder.

"Wen Qing!" Wuxian shouts as the new girl pushes herself to her feet only to be knocked to her knees by the guqin. He pulls at the strings, attempting to soften the blows, but this particular song can only be stopped by her own hand.

Jiang Yanli gasps and runs forward. "Wen Qing, come here! Let me help!"

The girl, Wen Qing, tries to stand but is hit with another wave of energy. She doesn't fall over this time, but she does stagger, and blood leaks out from her nose. Lan Yi's not sure what's happening, but she moves toward the guqin to cut it off before it can strike a third time, gritting her teeth as pain reverberates up her arm. She'd forgotten how damaging this could be to people who aren't strong enough to withstand her guqin's initial blows and the girl doesn't look like she'll stay conscious through one more strike. Wuxian shoots her a grateful look before rushing over to the girls.

Jiang Yanli unties the forehead ribbon from around her throat and grabs Wen Qing's hand, clumsily tying the ribbon around both their wrists. Lan Yi lets go of the guqin and the next wave of energy passes harmlessly through Wen Qing.

Jiang Yanli grips Wen Qing's hand and asks anxiously, "Are you hurt?"

"What are you doing here?" Wuxian demands, and his voice is harsh but his hands are gentle as he wipes the blood from her face.

She looks dazed by everything that's happened, but she swallows and lifts her head. She steps away from Wuxian, but Jiang Yanli stays right by her side thanks to the ribbon binding their

hands together.

Wen Qing's voice almost doesn't shake when she says, "I'm here for the Yin Iron."

Chapter End Notes

i hope you liked it!!

you can follow / harass me at: shanastoryteller.tumblr.com

i'm also on twitter now (<https://twitter.com/shanastorytella>) and i'm doing a weekly newsletter again with a newsletter exclusive mulan story (<https://tinyletter.com/shanastoryteller>), if you're interested in that sort of thing :)

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

sigh one more chapter. don't look at me

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Wen Ning doesn't ask questions because nothing can get his sister to tell him something if she's made up her mind. He knows something is happening and it's not good and she's worried about it, but that's all he's been able to pry from her.

Wei Wuxian reminds him of his sister. He keeps a lot of secrets and talks about none of them, and maybe that should make Wen Ning trust him less, but it's almost a comfort. There is a difference between dishonesty and manipulation and Wei Wuxian has plenty of the former and none of the later. Qing-jie likes him but doesn't want to, worried she's falling for some sort of trick, but Wen Ning doesn't think there's a trick. He thinks Wei Wuxian is just likeable and that's why they like him.

When Qing-jie comes to him in the middle of the night, soaked and pale and freezing to the touch, and says, "Wei Wuxian is going to help us," he doesn't know whether to be vindicated or concerned.

He's not sure what Wei Wuxian is supposed to be helping them with and his sister doesn't tell him.

But she does send off a message home when she thinks he's not looking. It makes unease curl on the bottom of his stomach, but – but she's his older sister. She's always protected him and their family before, and he has to assume that this is in service to the same.

Wen Ning acts like he saw nothing and trusts in his sister.

~

Wei Wuxian escorts Wen Qing and Jiang Yanli back to their rooms then takes probably too many risks to duck back into the cold spring into Aunt Yi's cave. She's still sitting in the center of the cave in a meditative pose, just like he left her.

This isn't an argument he'd wanted to have in front of the others, but, unfortunately, it's one that he feels they need to have.

"You should go to the mountain."

Aunt Yi opens her eyes, something weary in the slant of her mouth.

They've had this conversation before, but not like this, not with circumstances like these. "The Wen are after the Yin Iron. They know it's here. The best thing you can do is get it someplace they can't possibly get to, and then you'll be able to handle the Wen."

"They have other pieces," she says. "Even without this one, they're a threat. One it's my responsibility to neutralize."

He doesn't roll his eyes only because he knows that will lead to an entirely separate argument than the one he wants to have. "And how exactly are you going to do that from within this cave when the Wen are all the way in Nightless City?"

"And how are you planning to retrieve Wen Qing's people when they're just as far?" she asks. "They'll notice you missing. Maybe it won't trigger anyone's suspicions. Maybe it will."

For a moment, they share an equally frustrated look. They'd assured Wen Qing they would help, and they will follow through on that promise, but they hadn't gone into how exactly they were going to do that. Wei Wuxian wants to secure Wen Qing's people before they do anything, but Aunt Yi believes that if they deal with the Yin Iron quickly, her people won't be in danger at all.

"One of us has to go," Wei Wuxian says. "It can't be me. Even if me leaving wouldn't be suspicious, I – I can't."

She pauses, her frustration softening. "Wuxian?"

"They call me Senior Brother Wei," he says quietly. "I've been pretending to be the Jiang's first disciple for months, and even besides them there's Nie Huaisang and Mianmian and even your annoying, uptight descendants. They're my friends. I care about them. I can't leave them."

"Even if by leaving them you're helping them?" she asks gently.

Wei Wuxian looks around the damp, lonely cave that Aunt Yi has lived in for centuries, as penance for a crime no one remembers. "I don't want this. I don't want to leave the people I love to keep them safe."

Aunt Yi gives him a long, considering look. Then she walks over to her guqin, picks it up, and pushes it in his hands. "I will go to Baoshan. We will handle this. But you know that they're likely already moving, and we might not be able to handle both before they arrive." This is true. But Wei Wuxian is a lot more confident about Cloud Recesses' ability to stand against several dozen Wen rather than the whole clan, which is what Lan Yi will be facing. "While I'm gone, you must keep Cloud Recesses safe. There are songs in the secret library. You will need them."

"It's forbidden," he says, bewildered as he tries to hand her guqin back to her. "Why are you giving this to me? You'll need it! I can play my own!"

She gives him a stern look and reaches out to unwind the ribbon from around his wrist. She steps even closer, lifting her arms to tie it around his forehead in the same place all the Lans wear theirs. “You are my child in every way that matters. Nothing here is forbidden to you.”

He’s pretty sure Lan Qiren won’t agree with that, but he’s too busy blinking away the pressure behind his eyes to point that out.

~

When his sister tells him everything that’s happened, Jiang Cheng wants to get mad at her for not telling him what she was doing before letting Wei Wuxian drown her, but he’s too busy wrapping his mind around the rest of it.

Wei Wuxian walks into their room and he demands, “What were you thinking doing something so stupid without me?”

Wait, that wasn’t what he’d meant to say.

Jiang Yanli raises her sleeve to hide her smile while Wei Wuxian freezes, looking guilty until he processes what Jiang Cheng has said, then he shouts, “Hey! That was a really logical thing to do at the time! I would have brought you if I’d known it was going to end up being a stupid thing to do.”

He hates that that mollifies him. “How did you even know there was an immortal secretly living in a cave? Did you just fall into it while sneaking around after the Wen?”

“What?” His nose scrunches up. “No, don’t be silly. I’ve known Aunt Yi since I was twelve and I found her on purpose.” He pauses. “I maybe shouldn’t have told you that.”

That answers a question that he hadn’t even really bothered wondering about. “Is that what you were doing sneaking around Cloud Recesses in the first place?”

“I try and visit at least every other month,” he says, nonchalant, as if that isn’t a completely insane thing to say. “Their security sucks.”

“Um,” he says. “Should that be something we’re concerned with? Considering the Wen are maybe sort of planning to attack Cloud Recesses and steal their stuff?”

Wei Wuxian scrunches his nose. “Yeah. That’s something for *me* to worry about, actually.”

Jiang Cheng waits, and when no reasonable explanation is forthcoming, he huffs and demands, “Okay? What’s that supposed to mean?”

There’s a moment when he thinks that Wei Wuxian is going to lie to him again and he’ll have to hit him, but then his lips quirk up in a conspiratory grin. “Want to get in some trouble?”

No! Of course he doesn’t! His mother’s going to kill him twice over if she ever finds out about all the things he’s already done.

“Yes,” he says firmly.

Wei Wuxian puts him in a headlock and he only sort of tries to get out of it.

He thinks this is what having a brother would be like.

~

The Jiang siblings are up to something.

Nie Huaisang recognizes the signs, because usually *he's* the one pulling them into a mess of his own making. But now here he is, being perfectly well behaved and polite and not causing any sort of commotion that would upset his brother more than he normally does, and what does he get for it? Excluded from whatever mischief is currently going on. Him! Of all people! He *loves* mischief!

He's worked himself into a proper snit about it when he walks into his room to see Wei Wuxian sitting on his bed and flipping through his porn collection.

"These are good," Wei Wuxian says, and holds up a page from his most recent acquisition. "I don't think this is anatomically possible, though."

"If you're not that flexible, that's a you problem," he sniffs, huffily folding his hands in his sleeves like he's seen A-Yao do whenever Da-ge really pisses him off. His first instinct is to whine and flail around like he does with his brother, but he knows that Wei Wuxian will find it funny and it won't irritate him at all, which makes it worthless.

Wei Wuxian frowns and turns the book sideways, then tilts his head in the same direction, as if that makes any difference at all.

"What are you doing here?" he asks. Normally he would be happy to analyze the artistic merits of porn with Wei Wuxian, but he normally isn't keeping secrets from him.

Well, obviously he's keeping secrets from him, and everyone else too, but this is different. They're *doing things* and they haven't even invited him! What are they up to? Drinking? Sneaking around? Stealing?

He's done all those things before! He could help!

"So you know that favor A-Li asked you for?" he prompts.

That makes him feel almost properly bitter. Jiang Yanli had said very firmly and sternly that this was a huge secret and that he couldn't tell anyone what he was doing it and who he was doing it for. Not even Jiang Cheng would know.

But apparently Wei Wuxian does. He would have done Wei Wuxian a favor too, if he'd just asked.

"Obviously I know about the favor I was asked for," he says and tries his very best not to snap. It's only sort of successful. It actually makes him sort of sounds like A-Yao when he's talking to some of their higher ranked disciples.

Oh, hm, that's probably not good. He should keep an eye on that. A-Yao doesn't like going to Da-ge with problems, but dealing with problems is his brother's whole job, and he's much better at it when he knows what those problems are.

"It was actually kind of for me and I need your help," he says. That drains away most of Nie Huaisang's ire and if it didn't, Wei Wuxian's tone would. He sounds serious. He almost never sounds serious. "I think something is bad is going to happen and I need to make sure it doesn't."

"Is this why you're in Cloud Recesses?" he asks.

Some of Wei Wuxian's seriousness melts into offense. "I'm here because I'm the first disciple of Lotus Pier!"

"Liar," Nie Huaisang says, but it comes out fonder than it would have a few moments ago.

Wei Wuxian huffs but his frown reluctantly curls into a smirk. "That's why I need your help. You're the smartest person here. Well, besides me. And maybe Lan Xichen."

He's definitely smarter than Lan Xichen. Not that anybody is supposed to know that. No one's supposed to know he's smart at all, because smart people have to run drills and do a lot work that he'd prefer not to do. "And Jiang Yanli."

"We are both way dumber than Yanli-jie," he says seriously. It's a different sort of smart than the one they're talking about, but it's an important kind too. "So, are you going to help?"

He sniffs, raising his nose, but he knows he's not fooling him. "It's about time you asked. What do you need to do?"

Wei Wuxian actually looks sheepish and Nie Huaisang feels his first stab of real worry. He literally laughs in Lan Qiren's face and has never even flinched when facing the other disciples. What could possibly put that look on his face?

"I need to break into the Lan's secret library to do some research." He pauses. "Well, it's not *really* breaking in, because I know how to get in, but no one can know I'm doing it. Besides you, of course. And Yanli-jie. And A-Cheng."

Nie Huaisang regrets drinking all of his smuggled booze last night when he was busy sulking. He could really use a drink right about now.

Wei Wuxian reaches into his sleeve and pulls out a bottle of Emperor's Smile.

"How did you get that?" he demands. Lan Wangji has been watching Wei Wuxian like a hawk. He really needs to lighten up.

He preens for a moment longer before admitting, "Wen Ning got it for me. No one ever suspects him. I have to assume it's the baby face."

"I have a baby face," he mutters resentfully but accepts the bottle with a minimal amount of pouting.

This is a big deal. He doesn't think Wei Wuxian is up to anything malicious, but this isn't some harmless fun, or something that he can get involved in without consequences. Helping someone get past the security around the forbidden library could damage the relationship between the Nie and Lan for years, if not harming it permanently. Wei Wuxian doesn't know much about clan relations, no matter his claim of being the first disciple of Lotus Pier, or even of being a rogue cultivator. Rogue cultivators *have* to keep up to date on the latest gossip, otherwise they run the risk of offending clans by assisting in one territory and not the other, or by crossing boundaries they shouldn't. Song Lan is notorious for keeping meticulous track of that sort of thing.

If Wei Wuxian was who he said he was, he would know that the Nie and Lan are close, that Nie Huaisang's brother and Lan Xichen are as good of friends as two eventual clan heads were allowed to be. That means Nie Huaisang knows the forbidden library exists, and he knows that the knowledge of how to open it is *only* given to high ranking main family members.

Wei Wuxian had said that it wasn't really breaking in, because he knows how to get in on his own.

Only a high ranking Lan could have given him that information.

Except that there's no high ranking Lan who would go against Lan Qiren, and especially not using Wei Wuxian.

For every question about him that's answered, it seems like three more pop up in their place. Nie Huaisang almost wants to bring Lan Xichen into this, because if there really is a chance that something seriously bad will happen, then he deserves to know about it.

But there's too many variables. What he doesn't know outweighs what he does, so he'll wait, and watch, and be ready to beg forgiveness for not asking permission.

~

Jiang Yanli could be wrong. Maybe her theory isn't right. Being the disciple of Lan Yi could explain so much of Wei Wuxian, after all.

Except all the things it doesn't. Like how he even met Lan Yi in the first place when she hasn't left her cave in centuries.

She's more sure of herself than ever. Wei Wuxian is the disciple of Baoshan Sanren, just like his mother had been. She doesn't really understand how Lan Yi got involved, but it makes more sense that two immortals know each other than that Wei Wuxian stumbled across one who has no connection to him and no one else seems to even know is still alive.

It gives her a terrible idea. Lan Yi has gone off to do – something, to fix this mess with the Wen somehow. She's left Wei Wuxian behind to defend Cloud Recesses, to patch a hole in the Lan security system that Wei Wuxian has been exploiting himself for years, she's left him behind to keep everyone safe in her stead.

That's not fair.

She knows how strong Wei Wuxian. She's felt the power of his golden core beneath her hand, had seen him perfectly execute moves that clan seniors would struggle with.

But he's only her brother's age, and this is too much to put on him, and he's barely letting them help. Their disciples will listen to him, but they're all only juniors, and Lan Yi hadn't trusted that the Lan seniors would be enough to keep everyone safe, so it's – too much. It's too much to put on one very powerful boy who's willing to do everything he can to help them, to help Wen Qing, because doing what's right is more important to him than his own safety.

It makes her so *mad* sometimes that he's not really one of them. He's perfect for the Jiang. He'd be happy with them.

But that's not her choice to make. Considering who his master is, maybe it's not even Wei Wuxian's. Either way, there's nothing she can do about it.

This, however, she can do something about.

If she's right, then he's the perfect person to ask for help. If she's wrong, then she'll take the embarrassment and the scolding. And, well – he's rumored to be very skilled. If something bad does happen, having him there can only help.

She almost asks Luo Qingyang, but it's not right of her to ask her to keep a secret from her friend. So she slips away to the Jin rooms and looks Jin Zixuan in the eye to say, "I need to talk to you." She sweeps her gaze over the room, stopping briefly on Jin Zixun, and adds pointedly, "Alone."

It's not often that she puts on the airs of her rank, shoulders back and an arrogant tilt to her head. But she's just as much a clan heir as he is.

At least until they marry. *If* they marry. She's written him before, after their betrothal was announced, but he's never written her back. She promised her brother it didn't bother her.

She lied.

Jin Zixuan frowns at her, but she's not willing to back down. Eventually his gaze slides away from her like always, but he says, "It's fine, Zixun. You can go."

Jin Zixun scowls at her as he passes and Jiang Yanli resists the urge to roll her eyes. He has nothing on her mother, after all. She waits until she can't hear his footsteps anymore to say, "I need a favor. I need you to send a messenger butterfly to someone, and I need you to keep it a secret."

He does look at her then. "Why?"

"Because I'm asking you to," she says.

She won't explain herself. She won't beg. If he refuses, there are other ways she can go about this, other things she can do to try and help Wei Wuxian that don't involve compromising herself in front of her future husband more than she already has.

His face twitches, his jaw minutely moving from side to side as he obviously grinds his teeth and tries to pretend that he isn't. She makes sure her own expression is perfectly serene and unmoving, content to wait here for as long as it takes him to make up his mind.

Jin Zixuan crosses his arms, then uncrosses them. "Fine. If that's what you want."

"It is," she says, and it's a struggle to keep her voice neutral.

She hadn't thought that he cared about what she wanted.

~

The world has changed since Lan Yi saw it last.

Land is different. Cities are different. The paths she remembers walking are no longer there. Style has changed, and even the language has shifted. She does not recognize every word she overhears, even if she can understand it based on the words that surround it.

It doesn't occur to her to change her clothes or her appearance until a day into her travel and then she figures it's not worth the effort. By the time any possible rumors of a traveling Lan woman that doesn't match the description of any current clan members reaches the elders' ears, it won't matter anymore.

She's been breathing damp air for centuries and the wind whipping the breath from her lungs is nearly a relief. She hadn't thought of herself as weak, in that cave. She'd cultivated to immortality and the strength of her golden core was enough to sustain her life and protect her worst mistake.

But she thinks perhaps that cave wore at her slowly. She'd practiced her guqin and her sword and hadn't allowed her skill to lapse, but this is something different, something deeper. She hadn't felt weak before, but she feels *strong* now, just three days of sunshine and clean air restoring to her something that she hadn't even realized she'd lost.

Wei Wuxian had given her exact instructions. She thinks she could have found her way even without them.

If she's spent the past century slowly eroding herself, Baoshan has spent it doing the opposite. She was already ancient when Lan Yi met her, already an immortal of immense, nearly mythical power.

She's stronger now. Lan Yi knows the feel of her cultivation energy and the pulse of her golden core, and she must know how to restrain it, but it's likely she doesn't bother when it's just her on her mountain. The locals probably don't even notice. Why would they? It must just feel like part of the landscape to them.

Lan Yi steps onto the path up the mountain, the one no one is supposed to be able to see, but even after all this time, Baoshan's tricks are familiar to her. She's barely made it past the thicket of trees when Baoshan is landing in front of her, stepping off her sword before it's even reached the ground.

"What on earth took you so-" she starts, then cuts herself off, her face draining of color until she's nearly as white as her hair. Lan Yi's not sure what reaction she expected, but it wasn't this. Baoshan is terrified, and Lan Yi doesn't understand why until she asks, "What happened to Wuxian?"

"He's fine," she says, internally scolding herself for not anticipating this. Of course that would be her first thought at seeing her after Wuxian's been away from home so long. "Nothing's happened to him."

Instead of being reassured, Baoshan's eyes fill with tears. She blinks to keep them from falling. "Are you a ghost?"

Oh, Baoshan.

Lan Yi crosses the distance between them, grasping Baoshan around the waist with one arm and raising the other cradle her face. It's been so long, but her body remembers this. She tilts her head to press her lips against Baoshan's, opening her mouth into her gasp to let Baoshan deepen the kiss. Baoshan's hands grip her hips, pulling her impossibly closer, and it's not until Lan Yi tastes Baoshan's tears on her tongue that she breaks the kiss. She presses their foreheads together and murmurs, "Do I feel like a ghost?"

Baoshan laughs, too watery still, and Lan Yi dips her head down so she can kiss her once more, like she can swallow that sound out of Baoshan's mouth. It's several seconds later that Baoshan manages to ask, breathless, "What are you doing here?"

Lan Yi smiles, but Baoshan knows her too well, even after all this time, and her expression hardens. "Things are coming to a head, I'm afraid. It seems as if the Wen sect leader is as foolish as I was, but not nearly as clever. I have to stop it. I want your help."

"It's yours," Baoshan says instantly. Lan Yi blinks, and Baoshan pinches her side. "Did you think I would deny you? When have I ever managed that?"

"Come," Lan Yi says, unsheathing her own sword and stepping onto it. She holds her hand out to Baoshan, who summons her own sword back into her scabbard with a twitch of her hand before stepping onto Lan Yi's sword and wrapping her arms around her waist, pressing her body against Lan Yi's back. They could fly side by side easily, but they've been apart for so long. There's no reason they can't have this right now. "I'll explain on the way. If we don't hurry, Wuxian is going to have to handle a spot of trouble on his own."

"That boy," Baoshan sighs, her breath warm on the back of her neck.

Lan Yi laughs as they rise into the air and begins to tell Baoshan exactly what their boy has been doing these past few months.

~

Aunt Yi had been talking about battle songs, ones that worked with the barrier to turn the Lan's defense into an offense. Which is all well and good when they're on one side of the barrier and their enemies are on the other, but he's pretty sure that they're not going to get that lucky.

Wei Wuxian knows what he has to do. The specifics of how he's going to manage it, however, are a little cloudy at the moment. This is a trend he'd like to stop repeating.

Traditionally, jade tokens given to outsiders are collected upon their death. It happens rarely enough that it's actually fairly easy to keep track of that sort of thing. It's far easier, of course, to just tell the border guards that someone is allowed past the gates rather than giving them a key, and as such jade tokens were rarely distributed outside of the clan.

The problem is it's been several hundred years. The problem is that not everyone dies at home and not every corpse makes it's way back. The problems is the Lan haven't bothered to change their warding structure since their inception and anyone who wants to get past them has had all the time in the world to figure out how to do it.

The problem, Wei Wuxian thinks irritably to himself, is that the wards had already been in place by the time Aunt Yi was born and she had no reason to go poking around them before she exiled herself to her cave, which means if he's going to figure out how to mess with them, he's going to have to go back to the original records.

If he can find them. It would be very un-Lan like to not keep that sort of information handy, but he's wondered sometimes if the reason the Lans haven't updated their wards is because they literally can't.

~

Wei Ying is acting suspiciously.

He's *always* acting suspiciously, as far as Lan Wangji is concerned, but recently his behavior has been more odd than usual. Everything about him makes no sense and is probably a lie and he's just running around Cloud Recesses even though he's not who he says he is.

Uncle had said that he looks like Wei Changze. Uncle is skeptical of almost every other aspect of Wei Ying's story except his parentage. That part is probably true. He hopes it's true, and Wei Ying's name is his own.

Wei Ying is a deceiving liar. But he's a very good one. Most days he almost seems like exactly what he claims he is. He and the Jiang truly seem as if they're all old friends. He has a better relationship with all the other clans' disciples than possibly anyone else in Cloud Recesses. He even gets along with some of the Wen.

He acts like a first disciple and is clearly strong enough to hold the position, even considering his age. He's bored in class, as anyone of his rank and intelligence would be, but he mostly spends it making talismans or trading notes with Nie Huaisang. He laughs and causes trouble

and is friends with nearly everyone and sometimes it's almost possible to forget the way he'd easily adopted the moves of each clan, almost possible to ignore the deep well of power that is his golden core.

But he's been acting differently lately. Lan Wangji doesn't like it.

He falls in to step with Wei Ying as he walks the path along the perimeter of the grounds, something he's never done before but has now been doing every morning as soon as the first morning bell rings. It's barely light enough to see by.

Wei Ying doesn't even like mornings. He's said so, loudly, several times during the first lesson of the day. Yet here he is, waking up even earlier to take a walk that he's never taken before.

If it was anyone else, they would startle at his sudden presence, but Wei Ying isn't anyone else. He knew he was going to be there before he arrived, somehow. Xichen can do that too, but he hasn't quite managed it yet. "Hi Lan Zhan. You're up early."

"I'm always awake at this time," he answers, then says nothing, waiting to see if Wei Ying will explain his current activities on his own without prompting. He doesn't, so Lan Wangji continues, "You are usually not awake at this time."

"I like to sleep in," he answers.

Lan Wangji tries not to be too interested in that, tries not to hoard every piece of information he can about Wei Ying. That's probably another true thing. He doesn't know he would bother to lie about that. "Then why are awake now?"

"Do you watch the sunrise?" Wei Ying asks instead of answering him.

"I do not," he says, intending to steer the conversation back to Wei Ying and why he's doing something differently.

Instead Wei Ying stops walking and focuses his full attention on him. Lan Wangji thinks he might enjoy that in other circumstances, but Wei Ying is frowning. "Really? You get up this early every day and you don't even watch the sunrise?"

Lan Zhan had very much not been prepared for this turn in the conversation. "It's the same every morning, isn't it?"

He scoffs. "Doesn't the last sip of wine taste the same as the first? Of course it does! That doesn't make it any less delicious!" Wei Ying grabs his wrist and yanks him off the path. Lan Wangji stumbles after him because it's not like he wants Wei Ying to let him go. "Come on, let's find a good vantage point. We'll watch it together."

Lan Wangji doesn't say anything, too worried about what might come out if he starts talking, but in the end he concedes that Wei Ying might have a point.

He thinks could watch the warm golden light shifting across Wei Ying's face every single day and never grow tired of it.

This whole mess started in the first place because the best idea Wei Wuxian could come up with when he got caught sneaking around Cloud Recesses was to claim to be part of the Jiang in spite of not knowing a single one of them, so Jiang Cheng doesn't know why he expected a halfway decent plan out of him.

"Just *keep a look out?*" he demands incredulously. A-jie's lips are turned down into a frown and Nie Huaisang is peeking over the edge of his fan.

"It's not like we need to break in," Wei Wuxian huffs. "I just need to not get caught."

Jiang Cheng crosses his arms. "You don't want to get caught, and we're doing this in the middle of the day?"

Wei Wuxian mirrors his position. Jiang Cheng can tell he's mocking him, but he ignores it. "Students breaking into the library after curfew is very suspicious. Students in the library during normal library operating hours is not suspicious."

"Well, it is us," Nie Huaisang says, fanning himself. "That makes it a little suspicious."

All of them grimace, but it's true. They're either clan heirs or – whatever Wei Wuxian is. They rarely need to go to the library to look anything up. Wei Wuxian is the only one of them who goes, and it's not to study for class.

Privately, Jiang Cheng thinks the reason Wei Wuxian lounges around the library reading books that have nothing to do with what they're learning is so Lan Wangji will tower over him and lecture him about all the rules he's breaking. But that thought kind of hurts his brain, so he does his best not to dwell on it.

"The entrance to the forbidden library is in the normal library," Wei Wuxian continues. "We'll go when it's busiest, so no one will notice be disappearing and reappearing. And if it does look like someone's getting suspicious, or heading the forbidden library themselves, you just have to warn me and then stall them for long enough for me to make my way back up."

Jiang Cheng throws up his arms and Nie Huaisang raises his fan to cover his face again, probably because he's hiding an eyeroll.

"How are we supposed to do that, exactly?" A-jie asks, reaching out to pat his shoulder while staring intently at Wei Wuxian. She misses and ends up just kind of hitting his elbow.

"Just send a paperman," he says dismissively.

Jiang Cheng groans. The fact that Wei Wuxian just looks confused makes it even worse.

"Most of us can't move a portion of consciousness into paper," Nie Huaisang says dryly. "Do you have another idea?"

He frowns. "Really? I can teach you. It's not hard."

They all stare at him.

“It’s really not,” he insists, and his look turns contemplative as he looks at A-jie. “Actually, Yanli-jie, this should be very doable for you.”

That doesn’t make any sense at all. If it were anyone else, Jiang Cheng would say he was mocking her, except that this is Wei Wuxian and he would never do that.

“It should?” she asks nervously.

“Looks like it’s time to practice,” Wei Wuxian says, only a little gleefully.

Despair flashes across Nie Huaisang’s face and Jiang Cheng turns away to hide his smirk. He’s actually a fair hand at talismans, but he hates demonstrating that, just in case people start asking him to do it.

~

Wen Qing shouldn’t trust them. Experience has taught her not to trust anyone.

But Lan Yi had held her shoulders and looked at her, an impossible person who shouldn’t exist, and promised her an impossible thing. If anyone could save them, could save her family from the trap her uncle has set for them, then an immortal who’s been hiding the Yin Iron for centuries must be among them.

But Jiang Yanli had reached for her, putting her frail body in between her and the horribly painful waves of energy. She looped the ribbon around her, pulled her close, and tried to keep her safe even when she didn’t have to, even though she doesn’t even know her, even though the Jiang have all been rightfully wary of the Wen from the beginning.

But Wei Wuxian had wiped the blood from her face and hadn’t gotten mad at her for forcing her way into the secret he’s been keeping, in going after the person he’s been trying to protect all this time. Lan Yi could kill her easily, but she won’t, and just Wen Qing knowing she exists but the woman Wei Wuxian calls his aunt in danger. He should be furious with her. He should hate her. Instead, he’s promised to help her, instead he got Lan Yi to promise the same.

Wen Qing has learned the hard way that the only person she can rely on is herself.

She’s learned the hard way that all on her own, she’s not enough to stop the terrible things that are happening to her family, that may soon be happening to the rest of cultivation world. She shouldn’t trust them, but she needs to trust them.

She *wants* to trust them.

~

Wei Wuxian can’t get caught doing this, because then the Lans will all freak out and either kick him out or lock him up, and neither are acceptable, because then he won’t be able to protect them.

Well, actually, if they kick him out then he probably still could, but it's not like he can guarantee that outcome, so it's best if he manages to do this unnoticed.

They go the library in the hour before lunch and he has three papermen in his pocket, the same ones they practiced with and just waiting to be activated. Jiang Yanli and Nie Huaisang appear perfectly serene and normal about everything, but Jiang Cheng is a little twitchy. Luckily, Jiang Cheng is a little twitchy a lot, so hopefully no one will think anything of it. Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang briefly stand shoulder to shoulder to give him the cover to duck between two bookshelves that don't look like they have enough room for him to pass between them, but absolutely do as long as he steps perfectly.

He wonders if Aunt Yi designed this or if she just took inspiration from it for the entrance to her cave. If he has enough time down here, he can probably look it up.

The stairs are steep and he takes them two at a time until he arrives at a nondescript door. If he didn't know better, he'd think it just led to the cellar. But he does know better, so he runs his fingers over the door, trusting his touch more than his eyes in the dimly lit stairwell. His fingers catch on an unusual groove, and he takes out the forehead ribbon Aunt Yi gave him when he was twelve. He presses the cloud pattern into the groove, feeling it click into place. He almost summons his own guqin, but figures using one that the wards recognize couldn't hurt, and uses Aunt Yi's instead. He plays out a very specific tune, watching the door just in case he messes up and sets the wards off, but that doesn't happen. Instead there's the feeling of another click like when he set his forehead ribbon into the door, even though it's just solid wood, and then it swings open several inches.

He ducks inside, scanning the stacks of the books. Aunt Yi had described how it was organized the last time she was there. He'd been almost worried that it would have changed and he wouldn't be able to find something, or that the lock to the library itself had changed and he wouldn't be able to get in at all, but of course he should have known better. Lans hate change. It's too bad that Aunt Yi hadn't been able to act as clan leader for longer. Maybe the whole lot of them would be a whole lot less stuffy with Aunt Yi and Aunt Baoshan running around causing problems for a century or so.

Well, historically speaking, it would be Aunt Yi running around causing problems and Aunt Baoshan doing her best to pull her out of whatever mess she'd made, but all the better.

He notes where the battle song books are, which is what Aunt Yi really wanted him to look at, but he goes even further back to where their wards are documented.

Being able to defend Cloud Recesses if it's attacked is good. Stopping it from getting attacked in the first place is better.

It wouldn't have surprised him if they didn't have anything on their creation, considering how long ago it was, but luckily the famous Lan meticulousness is apparently an inherited trait. He lets himself have a moment to be irritated that the Lans have all the information they needed to update the wards and have chosen not to, then starts pulling down books that look as old as Aunt Baoshan. He holds them carefully, in case the books disintegrate in his hands, but then he notices the preservation talisman inked along their spines and instead starts

flipping through quickly, looking for exactly what he needs and not letting himself get distracted by all the other interesting bits.

He can't undo or replace the wards without the Lans noticing.

So he'll have to do something else.

Wei Wuxian reads as quickly as he can, copying down exact placements and symbols that he can't afford to forget. He wants to read more, to make sure there's nothing that he's missing, but he has two goals here. He carefully puts the ancient tomes back on the shelf, then reaches for the battle songs. They've been used much more recently and several of them have even been copied from previous versions. They're kept apart from the regular book not only because of their subject matter, but the risk they pose to the people who perform them.

He's not worried. Aunt Yi taught him her Chord Assassination technique. If he can manage that without hurting himself, then these won't pose much of a problem. Hopefully.

There are dozens of songs to choose from, and Wei Wuxian is halfway through a fourth likely prospect when Jiang Yanli's paperman jumps from his pocket and starts frantically grabbing at his hand, giving him an impressive papercut in the process.

Three songs will have to be good enough.

"I'm hurrying, no need to get violent," he mutters as Jiang Yanli's paperman starts stomping the top of his hand. He folds his notes and tucks them into the sleeve of his robe before putting the book back and hurrying up the stairs. The wards reset as soon as he closes the door behind him, so he doesn't worry about that.

Jiang Cheng is waiting for him at the entrance, his back to the crevice between bookshelves that he needs to squeeze his way through. Wei Wuxian pokes the back of Jiang Cheng's neck, just in case he's trying to prevent him from slipping out under unfriendly eyes, but instead he just reaches back and yanks Wei Wuxian into the library.

He's still blinking to adjust his eyes to the sudden brightness when Lan Xichen turns the corner, Meng Yao at his side.

Wei Wuxian's not an expert or anything, but at some point he thinks the Lan heir fooling around with – whatever Meng Yao is will cause some problems. Wei Wuxian doesn't think that he's part of the Nie family, but Nie Huaisang certainly acts like he is.

"Hi Lan Xichen, Meng Yao!" he says cheerfully. Jiang Cheng looks as if he's about to pass out, and Wei Wuxian wraps an arm around his shoulders just in case.

They both pause in their conversation to look in his direction. Possibly he should have moved from standing directly in front of the secret entrance to the secret library that he's not supposed to know about, but it's too late for that now.

"Wei Wuxian, Jiang Wanyin," Lan Xichen says politely, his eyes briefly flickering to the space behind them that Wei Wuxian had just come through. "It's nice to see you taking

advantage of the facilities.”

That’s so unfair, he’s here all the time! Not reading anything for class, of course, but still. “We’re hiding from your uncle,” he says confidently.

He hopes that Jiang Yanli is outside or something instead of just sitting in a different part of the library. Her hiding from Lan Qiren isn’t very believable. Well, it is to him, because he saw her lie to his face, but other people outside the Jiang and Nie Huaisang don’t know how cool she is.

Meng Yao’s mouth briefly twitches into something that’s almost a smile. Lan Xichen blinks. “Ah, yes. Well.”

“We’ll get going,” he says, dragging Jiang Cheng behind him. He manages a weak wave before Wei Wuxian yanks him around the corner.

All in all, a very successful endeavor. No one passed out or was banished or locked up!

~

“What’s that?” Song Lan asks, suddenly standing right at his shoulder.

Xiao Xingchen raises his hand for the messenger butterfly to land on. It flutters its wings at him before unfolding into a note. He lifts it up so they can both read at once.

It’s not the first time a clan had requested their assistance.

It’s the first time the request has come from a clan heir rather than the clan head or first disciple, or even an elder.

It’s the first time they’ve been bid to clan land proper rather than being asked to address an issue at a border town. Especially considering the requesting clan heir isn’t even asking them to come to her own clan’s land, but another’s.

All that, and it doesn’t even say *why*.

“It could be a trap,” Song Lan says.

Xiao Xingchen doesn’t turn to look at him only because he already knows what his face will look like. “This is a Jin butterfly. We’ve gotten them before.” He tilts the paper to see the characters lightly pressed into the corner. “Jin Zixuan.”

Another clan heir.

“Jiang Yanli is sending you a message through Jin Zixuan?” Song Lan asks skeptically.

“They are engaged,” he points out.

He shakes his head. “Not happily. Their mothers arranged it.”

Song Lan is the one who keeps up with that sort of thing. He'd been so young when Shijie brought him up the mountain that he was entirely out of gossip with keeping up with clan affairs and had never managed to quite get back into it once he came back down.

Sometimes, when everything is a little too bewildering, he thinks of Ying-di. His younger brother would love all of it and probably pick it up a lot faster than he has.

That's not a thought that does him any good, so he pushes it aside. "We shouldn't ignore a request from Jin and Jiang."

"It's to go to Cloud Recesses," he says. "That's Lan territory, and so tightly guarded we won't be able to get in anyway."

"We'll go to Caiyi town," Xiao Xingchen decides. It's only a couple days out of their way. "Then we will send a message to Lady Jiang. If it's truly important, she can meet us there, and we'll discover what all this is about."

Song Lan sighs, but gives a grudging nod. Xiao Xingchen slips the note into his sleeve, trying not to overthink the strange message.

Whatever it is that's waiting for them, they'll just have to go and meet it.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you liked it!!

you can follow / harass me at: shanastoryteller.tumblr.com

i'm also on twitter now (<https://twitter.com/shanastorytella>) and i'm doing a weekly newsletter again with a newsletter exclusive mulan story (<https://tinyletter.com/shanastoryteller>), if you're interested in that sort of thing :)

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

chapter count has been converted from imperial to metric

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

This is only a temporary solution to a long term problem, but as long as Cloud Recesses is still standing when things settle, Wei Wuxian can make that someone else's problem. Realistically Aunt Yi's.

He has his own jade token, the one given to Aunt Baoshan so many years ago, which means unlike the rest of the guest disciples, he doesn't have to use the main entrance. Unfortunately, if he gets caught by any of the patrols, it'll be immediately obvious that he has access to a jade token that he shouldn't. With his luck, they'll have kept records of that sort of thing, and they'll even be able to tell it's Baoshan Sanren's, which means he'll have to come clean about most of his secrets all at once.

He really doesn't want to do that.

But needs must, which is why he's sneaking around just outside the border of the Lan wards, laying down his own far enough outside of it that it should give him enough lead time to do something useful. He's only betting the safety of everyone in Cloud Recesses on him being fast enough.

Wei Wuxian sighs as he buries another hair stick into the ground.

He's good, but he's not good enough to set up something this complicated without using some sort of anchor. The varied types of metals are a little trickier to work around, but it's better than doing it with just ink and paper.

Hopefully no one thinks it's strange that the Jiang and Nie disciples are all suddenly using hair ribbons.

~

No matter how the pure moral center of the clan has been corroded, Wen Mao's descendants are not unskilled.

Baoshan Sanren flings her sword forward, her cultivation energy sharpening around the blade and beheading three cultivators before it returns to her hand. Lan Yi bows at an oncoming wave of Wen before rising and pressing her hands forward, pushing forward a shimmering wall of energy that strips the skin from her bones.

Lan Yi had gotten inventive in that cave.

Maybe against only one of them, the Wen would be successful. But against two immortals? Against her and Lan Yi fighting together?

Hopefully they'll start surrendering soon. The Dafan Wen will take over as the main branch of the Wen, but it would be better if the girl Lan Yi had told her about didn't have to start from scratch.

If this ends soon, maybe they can catch up to the Wen army that had left before they'd arrived and save their kid some trouble.

It's only a small fraction of the Wen. It's more important for her and Lan Yi to be here. If they leave, then Wen Qing's people will be in danger. If she allows Wen Qing's people to be endangered, she'll make a liar out of Lan Yi and Wuxian both, which she's unwilling to do.

But that means that Cloud Recesses will have to defend itself.

~

Even though they'd traveled to Caiyi city at her request, Xiao Xingchen is still surprised to see Jiang Yanli making her way towards their table, wearing her clan robes rather than those of a guest disciple.

They get to their feet to bow to her and she inclines her head in return. She takes a seat and says, "Thank you for coming."

"Your clan has always been courteous to us, Lady Jiang," Song Lan says politely. "I have to admit at surprised at the specifics of your missive, as well as your appearance here today."

Xiao Xingchen doesn't understand what Song Lan is getting at, but Jiang Yanli does. Her lips pull back in amusement. "I am the eldest child and second heir of the Jiang. It would be unreasonable for Clan Leader Lan to refuse my reasonable request for an afternoon excursion to run a personal errand."

Oh, right, the guest disciples aren't supposed to leave Cloud Recesses unaccompanied. He hadn't thought of that.

"I see," Song Lan says. "Lady Jiang. What is it exactly that you'd like our assistance with?"

Her amusement fades and she presses her hands flat against the table in front of her to keep herself from fidgeting. Xiao Xingchen recognizes the gesture because it's the same one he used to make after he first descended the mountain. "I hope nothing. I hope that I have imposed upon your good nature without reason. But I fear for the safety of all who reside in Cloud Recesses and even the city we're in now."

He and Song Lan sit up straighter. Her tone is low and serious and in spite of her age, he doesn't doubt her. He's heard the rumors about her, mostly from Song Lan, but now that he's sitting in front of her, he doesn't think that any of them can be accurate. Jiang Yanli is not a woman who invites doubt.

But instead of explaining, she lays a purse heavy with silver in front of them. “I wish I could tell you more, but I cannot. If what I fear does not come to pass, then I will have betrayed someone who’s very important to me for nothing. I can’t risk that. I request that you stay in the city. I will cover your expenses. All I ask is that if there is trouble, you assist us.”

They’ve done more for less, and it’s not as if a few more days of their time is worth alienating the second Jiang heir and fiancée to the Jin heir.

More than any of that, he believes her. If she offered nothing at all, he’d insist they stay anyway, until whatever danger she fears either comes to fruition or passes.

“How will we know if there’s trouble?” Song Lan asks.

She’s smiling again, but it’s more rueful than amused. “Unfortunately, you don’t have to worry about that. You’ll know. It will be impossible to miss.” She bows to them, lower than is proper. “Please, grant me this favor. I will be indebted to you.”

“Please,” Xiao Xingchen says, grabbing her forearms and pushing her upright. “It would be our pleasure to provide you aid. Do not trouble yourself.”

She smiles at him, sweet and sincere and so relieved that her age shines through her competence. She’s young and she’s scared and she wants their help. There’s no question about what the right thing to do is.

After she’s gone, Song Lan weighs the purse in his hand and says, “You don’t want to get involved in the clans. You think they’re greedy and unfocused and arrogant.”

All of this is true. He was raised by Baoshan Sanren. She did not dislike the clans, exactly, but he’d been taught to be a certain type of cultivator and it chafed at him that the clan cultivators were not raised to be the same, that they’re focused on status and wealth and not the ills of the land they were meant to protect.

However.

“I think I’d like them a lot more if Lady Jiang and her ilk were in charge of them,” he says.

Although, it’s possible that he’s just biased.

Something about her determination reminds him of Ying-di. He thinks his brother would like her, if they ever got the chance to meet.

~

It’s Lan Wangji’s turn on the patrol roster, which is how he finds Wei Ying stretched out on a rock near the cold springs, his hands behind his head. At least he doesn’t appear to have any alcohol. “You are breaking curfew.”

“Hey Lan Zhan,” he says absently, not looking at him. “You don’t look at the sunrise. Do you at least watch the stars?”

Wei Ying keeps saying things to him that no one ever has before. It makes him feel off balance, like when he was a little kid and Xichen would spin him around until he fell over. “They do not need watching. They do not move.” Wei Ying opens his mouth and he quickly amends, “They do not move often.”

Unlike Wei Ying. He’s constantly moving and in need of constant supervision. Maybe if he watches closely enough, something about him will start making sense.

He pats the space next to him. “Take a seat. They deserve a good look. What if one disappears and you never notice because you were too busy to get a proper look at them in the first place?”

Lan Wangji is sure that’s already happened and he can’t bring himself to consider it any sort of tragedy. “I’m on patrol.”

“It’s nearly time to switch the shifts anyway,” Wei Ying says. How does he know that? “Come on.”

He hesitates. He really shouldn’t. He should go back to his room and get as close to a proper night’s rest that he can. He should escort Wei Ying back to his dorm and issue punishments in the morning.

“Are you worried about your hair?” He extends one arm out. “Here. Now it won’t get messed up.”

Surely he can only be expected to endure so much.

It’s disgraceful. Dishonorable. Inappropriate, unnecessary, and beneath him.

Lan Wangji slowly lowers himself and then leans back until his head hits Wei Ying’s forearm. Considering how tense the rest of his body is, it’s an uncomfortable position, but he refuses to move.

“I love the stars,” Wei Ying says and Lan Wangji forces himself to focus on the night sky. “When I was a kid I’d beg to sleep outside so I could fall asleep looking at them. I always woke up in bed after. I was such a needy kid.”

“Was it hard?” he asks. “To grow up a rogue cultivator?”

He wants to ask about Wei Ying’s life so that he can know him better. He doesn’t want to ask about Wei Ying’s life because he doesn’t want to be lied to.

Wei Ying shrugs, and Lan Wangji feels the motion more than he sees it. “Yes. And not really. A lot of things were difficult, if you want to look at it that way, but the important things were easy because the people around me worked hard to make them that way.”

None of that means anything to Lan Wangji, but at least it doesn’t sound like he’s lying. It’s more than he’d been hoping for. Emboldened, he says, “I don’t understand.”

He hums, and the silence stretches out, but it doesn't feel uncomfortable like other silences that Lan Wangji often finds himself an unwilling participant in. The stars are bright and he can feel Wei Ying's warmth through all seven layers of his robes. Eventually Wei Ying says, "It's the same as Lan Qiren, you know?"

"What?" he asks, turning his head to look at Wei Ying. He really hadn't been expecting him to bring up his uncle.

"Well, you know, obviously I think he's too high strung and overly focused on the rules," Lan Wangji tries to muster up some sort of indignation over this, but it's difficult when Wei Ying has said as much to his uncle's face, "but this wasn't supposed to be his life, and I doubt it's what he wanted, but he's doing it anyway. Because he loves you. And your brother, and your father. So he makes it easy."

Lan Wangji would never describe anything about his uncle as *easy*.

Some of that must come through from his silence, because Wei Ying lets out a soft huff of laughter and turns to look at him. Lan Wangji does the same, and tells himself it's okay because Wei Wuxian did it first. "He was the younger brother, right? Like you are. He wasn't supposed to have to be clan head."

He's never thought of that before. Uncle used to hold the same position he does, the brother to the future the clan head, the second heir.

"I don't think he likes it," Wei Ying continues. "I think it stresses him out and frustrates him. I don't think he was planning to have kids either, because he doesn't have a spouse or his own children and as an acting clan head it's not like finding someone willing would be hard, even with his personality. Even Jin Guangshan has a wife, and I'd rather marry your uncle than him."

Putting aside that disturbing thought, there's some obvious truth to what Wei Ying is saying. The elders had tried to pressure Uncle to get married, to have his own children, and he'd refused. Xichen had said it was to protect them, to keep heirs with less divisive parentage from taking their place. Personally, Lan Wangji doesn't really care if he's the second heir or the third or the eighth. He knows his brother is dedicated to serving and protecting their clan, but he doesn't think Xichen centers that identity around being the clan head specifically. If Uncle did have his own children, and they were made the first heirs over him and Xichen despite their birth, he wouldn't mind.

Beyond all that, there's the obvious answer that if the council insisted that that Uncle was more than just the Acting Clan Head and forced the title on him properly, he'd still be able to choose his own succession. He could name Xichen the heir over his own children regardless of what the council wanted.

Which means that maybe Wei Ying is right. Maybe his uncle didn't want kids or the responsibility or any of that, but he'd spent two decades forced into that role anyway.

"Don't be upset," Wei Ying says. Lan Wangji doesn't think his face is giving anything away, but it must be. "It's not a bad thing, or a sad thing."

“He has a lived hard life that he did not want because of me,” Lan Wangji says. The cold night air is making his eyes sting. “That is not a cause of celebration.”

Wei Ying sighs and reaches out to poke his forehead, dangerously close to his forehead ribbon. “The woman who raised me was terrified to lose me like she’d lost the other children she helped. But she let me wander to the nearest city as a child and gave me money to buy food that I loved, even though she had rules against that sort of thing. She did something that was painful and difficult for her so I could have what I wanted. Because she loved me.”

This sounds like another true thing, and Lan Wangji wants to cling to that, but more than anything else he’s just confused. “I don’t understand.”

“Not every trial is a loss. Lan Qiren chose the hardest path for himself so that his brother and his nephews could have the easier one.” Wei Ying’s smile softens. “I think that the hardest things we do, we do for love. Because if it wasn’t for love, those hard things wouldn’t be worth it. If people love us, they do not want us to feel guilty over their sacrifices, only warmed by them. And I think that your uncle loves you very much.”

Oh.

Maybe it isn’t so cold after all.

~

Wen Qing has no love for her uncle but she did learn an important lesson from him.

Power cannot be given. It can only be earned. It can only be taken.

If her branch of the family is to take over as the main branch, if those distant family members and servants and civilians are going to accept the rule of a different ruling branch of the family, it can’t be just because a couple immortals say so. No matter the power of Lan Yi, or the infamous Baoshan Sanren, the Dafan Wen will have to make their own mark, they’ll have to prove they’ve earned it if they want to maintain any sort of order.

Wen Qing will have to prove that she’s earned it.

She knows how. She may not like it, not revel in it, but she’s committed to it.

Too many people are risking themselves to help her and too many people are depending on her to let her squeamishness get in her way.

It’s a good thing she brought a lot of pins.

~

It’s been several days since Wei Wuxian collected every piece of jewelry his clan had, which was a much more difficult task for him than it had been for the Jiang. Nie Huaisang’s disciples don’t care enough about being ornamental to question him over it, but he’d had to come up with an excuse for A-Yao. He doesn’t think that he’d totally bought his story about a little recreational gambling between clan heirs, even if the lie had been supported by the

Jiang disciples' hair pieces also all going missing and Jin Zixuan being an unreadable asshole, but thankfully he's been too distracted by Lan Xichen's attention to question him over it.

Frankly, Lan Xichen is lucky that Nie Huaisang currently has bigger problems, otherwise he'd absolutely be giving him shit about seducing his brother's – er, whatever A-Yao is to his brother. After all this is over, he's really going to have to have several conversations with his brother about A-Yao if they don't want to lose him to the Lan.

He hadn't asked A-Yao for his hair ornament. Wei Wuxian had said that they didn't need it, and even if they had, he would have rather snuck down to Caiyi and bought a several dozen of them with his own money rather than ask for A-Yao's.

Nie Huaisang had given A-Yao that hair ornament off his own head when he was still a kid. Beyond that, it's an important reminder to Lan Xichen that A-Yao already belongs to a clan and he's not for sale.

They're all in class, basically none of the clan heirs or Wei Wuxian paying attention to the lecture because they already know this, and enough time has passed that he's hopeful that maybe Wei Wuxian was just being overly cautious, that whatever terrible thing he was afraid of won't actually come to pass.

Which of course is when Wei Wuxian bolts upright, pulls a burning talisman from his pocket, and says, "Well, fuck."

He shouldn't have jinxed it.

Wei Wuxian goes running from the classroom, Jiang Cheng and the top ranked Jiang following a step behind him. Nie Hua looks towards him and he gives her a sharp nod. They'd discussed this. She leaps over the desk to go after them. Fen Zirui steps on his foot as he passes, because he thinks this whole thing is insane and he doesn't want to be involved, but he should have thought of that before being the third scariest Nie cultivator in Cloud Recesses.

Lan Wangji pushes himself up, bows to the bewildered professor, and breaks one of the rules of Cloud Recesses by running out of the room. Damn. He doesn't think Wei Wuxian would tell Lan Wangji anything, at least not without telling the rest of them that he had, but he can't think of any other explanation. He's known Lan Wangji practically his whole life and he's not one to rush headfirst into anything. He has to know *something*.

"If you want to do the right thing," Jiang Yanli says, "then you should go with them."

Nie Huaisang blinks, surprised that any of the Jiang would have refused to follow Jiang Cheng, but she's not speaking to one of her own clan.

She's speaking to Jin Zixuan.

They're both standing, looking at each other like they're the only ones in the room, even though Jin Zixuan is frowning and holding his sword in a white knuckled grip.

“What the hell are you-” Jin Zixun starts, sneering.

Jin Zixuan bolts from the room.

His cousin stares after him, open mouthed. “Zixuan, what are you – Zixuan!” he shouts before going after him. Mianmian looks rapidly between Jiang Yanli and the door before shrugging and chasing after them.

Mianmian will be fine, hopefully, but he’s a little dubious about Jin Zixun. Then again, he supposes Jin Zixuan wouldn’t keep him around if he was totally useless, cousin or not.

Jin Zixuan doesn’t know what’s going on. He only has Jiang Yanli’s word that getting involved is the right thing to do, and apparently that’s enough for him.

Maybe he does deserve her.

He’s distracted from the thought by the teacher demanding to know what’s going on.

Wen Qing and Wen Ning are the only Wens that ever bother to come to classes. Wen Qing slips away while the teacher is distracted, being far more subtle about it than rest of them had been. Wen Ning follows her a few moments later. He wishes he could send some disciples after them, even if only for backup, but he understands that this is something they have to do on their own.

He hates it, though.

Nie Huaisang takes out the bottle of wine from his sleeve and starts drinking. Either way, he thinks he going to need it.

~

Jiang Cheng doesn’t really understand the complex talisman and ward work that Wei Wuxian had described to them, but he doesn’t need to for him to know that they have a very small window to prevent this from becoming a massacre one way or another.

There are the perimeter wards, little flimsy things that Wei Wuxian set up all over the mountains surrounding Cloud Recesses, and that’s what caused his talisman to catch flames.

Then there are much stronger, sort of terrifying wards that he set up outside the ones that the Lan have already put up, ready to be activated and work with the existing Lan wards in a way that still doesn’t make any sense to him even after Wei Wuxian had explained it three times. The important part is that it makes it stronger, that jade tokens aren’t enough to get through anymore.

Nie Huaisang had suggested they all just wait inside the perimeter where it was safe, but he’s barely finished the thought before they’d all realized the problem with that.

Caiyi.

When the Wens find themselves unable to get into Cloud Recesses, they'll attack the civilians. It's their job to protect the civilians. They can't let that happen, so they have to get involved, they have to protect Cloud Recesses and keep the Wen focused and fighting in the mountains and not give them the chance to burn and destroy the city below.

To do that, they have to get outside of the protection of the wards before the Wens cross over them. They have to lock themselves out to keep the Lans locked in.

With the Wen disciples.

It's the lesser of two evils, but it still makes him nervous.

They cross out of the front gate and Wei Wuxian leads them further down the mountain. It's then that Jiang Cheng notices that there are more people here, not just the Jiang and the Nie, but several Jin and even Lan Wangji for some reason.

Hopefully they'll end up getting stabbed instead of his own people.

~

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji says, "what's going on?"

He doesn't look at him, instead drawing a complicated talisman in the air with crackling red cultivation energy. "An army is coming for Cloud Recesses. If you get behind the gate, you'll be safe."

Lang Wangji doesn't waste any time disbelieving him. As many lies as Wei Ying tells, he would not lie about this. Instead he unsheathes his sword. The grin Wei Ying sends him is enough to make it worth it.

"It's really more a battalion," Jiang Cheng says.

"What's going on? What army?" Jin Zixun demands. "Or battalion, or whatever."

Wei Ying shoves the most complicated talisman he's ever seen forward, the motion using his whole body.

The talisman hits the Lan wards and shatters against it like a firework. Every place a spark touches lights up and strings of blue light intersect with red, wrapping together and expanding. It takes him several seconds to realize that the red is coming from several feet away from where he knows the edge of the wards is.

The same reaction is happening as far as he can see and expanding far above that, until every bit of Cloud Recesses he can see is encased in a glittering dome of faint blue and bright red strings of cultivation energy.

Luo Qingyang whistles. "Damn. Just one of the things you pick up from being a rogue cultivator, huh?"

“Shut up,” Wei Ying says, entirely without bite. “We have about twenty seconds until a couple hundred really pissed off cultivators are on top of us.”

“How do you know they’ll head here anyway? Jiang Cheng asks. “They could enter Cloud Recesses from any direction.”

Wei Ying shakes his head. “Not easily. Even if they’re using a way that doesn’t need the entrance specifically, this is the weakest point of the wards. It’s their best shot. They’ll be here.”

He wants to say that no one would be able to get through the wards, but considering what he’s just seen Wei Ying do, he’s a lot less confident in that assessment.

“Couple *hundred*?” Jin Zixuan repeats.

“Relax,” Wei Ying says and then sticks his sheathed sword in his belt for some insane reason. He passes his hand in front of himself in a move Lan Wangji is so familiar with and yet one that Wei Ying can’t possibly be making. Except he is, and a guqin appears underneath his hands. Not just any guqin, but one obviously Lan in design, and one radiating so much power that it has to be the spiritual tool of a very old and powerful Lan. It has to be, and yet it can’t be, because Lan Wangji knows all the Lans, obviously, and none of them have the same energy as that guqin. “You just have to take care of the ones that get by me.”

Fen Zirui rolls his eyes, his saber balanced on his shoulder. “Oh, is that all?”

“I’m very impressive and I don’t think you’re all taking that seriously,” Wei Ying complains. “These were meant take down *real* armies. It should be able to handle the Wen.”

“Should,” one of the Jiang disciples repeats, but she’s grinning.

He reaches out, hesitates for a moment, then grabs onto Wei Ying’s shoulder. He doesn’t say anything, but Wei Ying looks him in the eyes and smiles. He nods towards his sword. “Your guqin would probably serve you better. Do you know any battle songs?”

“Chord assassination,” he answers.

Wei Ying shouldn’t even know what that is, but Lan Wangji is unsurprised when he lights up and says, “Really? Are you any good?” He raises an eyebrow and Wei Ying claps him on the back. “Of course you are, of course you are, what a silly question. This is great! Maybe we won’t need backup after all!”

“Backup for *what*? Jin Zixun spits.

He gets his answer when the sky turns red with Wen cultivators.

~

Lan Xichen is stuck inside of Cloud Recesses under a strange sort of glowing net that would be impressive if he had the room to feel anything but horrified. What they’d feared has come

to pass. The Wens are making a move against them, but there's something worse than the Wen he can see surrounding Cloud Recesses.

Wangji isn't here. Lan Xichen doesn't know where his brother is.

"What's happening?" Uncle shouts.

Everyone is gathered outside, staring up at the strange wards. Which of course means they see the exact moment that a flood of Wen cultivators fly over and drop flaming talismans over them.

They also all see the flaming talismans hit the strange net and disintegrate on contact.

"Do not panic," Jiang Yanli says, pitching her voice so it cuts through the shouts and confusion. "We are safe in here."

He shifts towards her, noting A-Yao's glare directed at Huaisang and the grip he has on the collar of Huaisang's robe without truly processing it. "What are you talking about? What's happening?"

"The Wen have planned an attack, but don't worry. It's being handled," she says, and it's so clear that she's speaking to all the frantic disciples surrounding them and the anxious servants and the parents clutching their children rather than just him.

Xichen knows this. He sees it. But he can't accept it. "My brother is out there!" he snaps, closing the distance between them to tower over her. He knows it's a cheap shot, considering the difference in their height, but he's terrified.

Instead of wilting, Jiang Yanli tilts her head back to look him in the eye. Like this, she almost reminds him of her mother. "So are *mine*!"

Her fury more than the truth of the matter is what throws him off balance, even though of course she's right. Jiang Cheng is out there. Wei Wuxian had been the first to go running. Others had followed. There are more Jiang disciples out there than anyone else, and second heir or not, Jiang Yanli is the eldest, her brother respects her. They're out there with her blessing, with her orders.

That's what tempers him. Jiang Yanli would not put her own people in danger without cause.

"What's going on?" he repeats.

"I can explain."

They turn. At first he thinks that Wen Qing has changed into her clan's robes, but a second later he realizes that's incorrect. She's still wearing the traditional white robes of a guest disciple.

It's that she's covered in blood.

Several people raise their swords in her direction. None of them are Nie or Jiang.

He'd forgotten about the Wen guest disciples. He hadn't seen them and assumed they'd snuck outside but what if they're sabotaging them from the inside, hiding out and waiting to do something terrible –

“Lower your swords!” Jiang Yanli shouts, pushing herself forward to put herself in front of Wen Qing. Every Jiang reaches for their swords then, making it clear what they'll do if anyone tries to get to Wen Qing by going through their senior sister. “She's not our enemy.”

Wen Qing steps forward and puts her hand on Jiang Yanli's shoulder, leaving behind a bloody handprint. More interestingly, none of the Jiang react. They must really believe that Wen Qing isn't a threat.

At least to them.

“What's the meaning of this?” Uncle demands. “Where are the rest of your clan? How have you trapped us here?”

“Wen Ning is finishing clean up,” she says. Her hands are trembling. Lan Xichen has barely had the time to notice before she's placing them behind her back and lifting her chin. “Everyone else is dead.”

Nie Huaisang whistles. A-Yao grabs Nie Huaisang's fan out of his belt and hits him with it, the most disrespectful Lan Xichen has ever seen A-Yao be in public. If things were any less dire, it would make him smile.

Uncle marches to the front of them, his hand on his sword and his eyes narrowed. “Explain yourself, Lady Wen.”

He's speaking to her respectfully. That does surprise him. Whatever's happening, Uncle must at least have an idea about it, otherwise he wouldn't be so calm.

She inclines her head, shallower than he thinks is appropriate but then again he doesn't have the full context for what's happening.

He doesn't know where his brother is.

“We came here to steal the Yin Iron from you,” she says. There's muttering from the elders, but Uncle doesn't react. He's not surprised. “My uncle wants all the pieces for himself so he can force the other clans to submit to his will. It's not enough for him to be the Chief Cultivator. He wants more power.”

There's a tumble of voices shouting insults and demanding explanations. Uncle allows it for a moment before raising his hand. They all fall silent. “And you've killed not only his disciples, but his son?”

Wen Chao. He hadn't thought about that.

“He killed my father,” she says. There's shouting in the distance and the strange glowing cage of red cultivation energy surrounding them shakes but does not break. “The only reason

I'm here is because he's holding the Dafan Wen hostage. The only reason I'm here is because my little brother's safety hinged on my cooperation."

"Wen Ruohan will kill your people in retaliation for your betrayal," Uncle says. "You understand that, don't you?"

Wen Qing does the last thing Lan Xichen expects her to do.

She smiles.

~

Jin Zixuan can't make sense of Wei Wuxian and unlike seemingly everyone else, he hasn't bothered to try.

If the Jiang want to claim a random rogue cultivator is their first disciple, that doesn't have anything to do with him. If Jiang Yanli wants to be stiff and quiet and so polite it burns around him, and then wants to smile and laugh with this random cultivator, wants to let him put his arms around her and tug on her hair and call her sister, then – then that doesn't have anything to do with him either.

Wei Wuxian and all the dirty and disapproving glances he sends his way simply aren't worth thinking about.

Now, standing at Wei Wuxian's back as more Wen than he's ever seen in one place come rushing towards them, he thinks that maybe that was a mistake.

They're going to die. They're going to die so quickly, crushed under the number of people without the need for anyone to even raise a sword –

Wei Wuxian finishes plucking out some sharp, seemingly off key notes on his guqin and a wave of energy so powerful it makes the air shimmer rushes out in front of him. It hits the Wen and the first line of them fall to the ground, their skin blackened and burned, while those nearest to them catch flames to varying degrees.

"Gross," Nie Hua says. His cousin doesn't say anything, but his face makes it clear that he agrees. Qingyang just looks impressed. She's so much tougher than anyone ever gives her credit for.

The Wen are scrambling to put out their clan members, momentarily distracted from their mission of killing them. Wei Wuxian has already started playing again. A couple Wen rush forward, but Lan Wangji does something on his guqin that doesn't seem to require the same amount of build up. It seems to kill one of the Wen where she stands and sends the others staggering backwards.

Jiang Cheng steps forward to poke Wei Wuxian in the back with the hilt of his sword and hisses, "What was that?"

"Not me," Wei Wuxian answers absently, looking down at the strings as he plays rather than the oncoming Wen. It seems stupid until Jin Zixuan realizes he's counting on the rest of them

to protect him while he plays. He raises his sword a little higher. “Or not only me. *I* couldn’t do that. I guess Aunt Yi wanted me to use hers for a reason.”

That doesn’t make any sense to him, but Jiang Cheng nods like it explains something. Then Wen are running over the smoking bodies to get at them and Jin Zixuan experiences the worst two minutes of his life fighting cultivators that are older and more experienced than him but luckily not stronger until Wei Wuxian shouts and they’re running for the safety of his back as he lets out another devastating wave of energy. He doesn’t know what this one does, but it causes nearly two dozen seemingly unharmed Wen to fall dead on the spot. It’s less gory but significantly more disturbing.

Jin Zixuan can’t make sense of it, but it means that they actually stand a chance against the crush of cultivators trying to kill them, so he decides that it’s a good thing.

~

In a fair fight, his sister loses.

Wen Ning supposes it’s a good thing that Qing-jie doesn’t fight fair.

She hadn’t wanted him to come with her. She’d wanted him to stay in the classroom, safe and where he couldn’t be blamed for what she was about to do.

He hadn’t even known what exactly she’d been planning. He’d only known that he hadn’t wanted her to do it alone.

Qing-jie wouldn’t put their family in danger – their real family, not the cousins and uncle who have been so cruel, who had taken their father away. He believes that the same way he believes that the sun will rise each morning, less faith and more a fact, something that just is. So he doesn’t question her or doubt her.

But now that he’s going around the bodies of all their clan members and pulling out the pins that Qing-jie had spent the past week shoving into the base of their skulls while they were sleeping. All it had taken was one precise application of cultivation energy for them all to collapse, and killing them had been easy then.

It’s not fair, or brave, or romantic.

But it means that the people who had hurt them are dead and they’re not.

Qing-jie is so scary. He loves her.

~

Jiang Yanli had been right. It’s impossible not to notice.

Xiao Xingchen hears the screaming first. He grabs his sword and bolts, Song Lan right behind him. They spill out onto the street and mostly he scans it up and down, passing his eyes over the terrified people running into the nearest shop or house and trying to find what it is they’re running from.

Song Lan taps his shoulder and then points up. He follows the gesture only to see what looks like a couple hundred Wen flying over them. They're not descending, instead flying straight over the city.

They're headed for Cloud Recess. Which holds not only the Lan, but every heir of the major sects.

It seems an idiotic move. He'd say that nothing could unite the other four major clans when they've been allowing the Wen's atrocities for decades, but if anything could it would be the death of their children. It's a stupid move, and for all their other flaws, he wouldn't describe the Wen as stupid.

He and Song Lan step onto their swords, staying above the frantic people but far before the Wens. It's a relief when they're able to enter the woods. The trees provide enough cover that the Wen are unlikely to notice them, but having to dodge around them means that the Wen will arrive far before they do.

"The Lan have wards," Song Lan says.

Xiao Xingchen says the obvious because Song Lan doesn't want to. "They wouldn't be attacking unless they had a way to get around them."

Song Lan's frown deepens, but he just nods.

They hear the battle before they see it, the harsh cords of a guqin reverberating through the air. When they arrive, it's to see the Wen cultivators pressed up against the entrance of Cloud Recesses. For one moment he thinks that the Lan wards have managed to hold, but the bright red cultivation energy in the distance doesn't belong to the Lan.

They are here on Jiang Yanli's request. They promised their help. Regardless, helping is the right thing to do it, and they would be interfering anyway.

But when he sees that familiar cultivation energy, concentrated enough that he can feel it from here, his blood runs cold.

"Xingchen?" Song Lan asks softly.

He lurches forward, slicing the heads off the two nearest Wen with one move, and keeps going.

Song Lan rushes to his side, gutting a Wen as he passes. "What's wrong?"

He jumps up, using his golden core to suspend him in the air so he can see over the makeshift battlefield. Over a quarter of the Wen are dead, their clansmen having to climb over their bodies to try and get closer. Instead of clan elders defending Cloud Recesses, he only sees a single Lan there, the teenage Second Jade of Lan.

They're all teenagers. There's Jiang and Nie and even a couple Jin and not a single senior disciple.

The person frantically playing the guqin while the other defend him is Ying-di.

He falls back down, landing on a Wen and shoving his sword into her spine and yanking it out before she's even hit the ground. He doesn't know what his face looks like right now, but whatever it is has Song Lan the closest to frantic he's ever seen. "My brother is up there."

Song Lan blinks and then his face settles into determination.

Xiao Xingchen pulls him back as the next attack leaves the guqin. He does a double take, because that power isn't just Ying-di's, but he doesn't have time to linger over it because then he and Song Lan are fighting their way through the throng of Wen, trying to make it to the front before the next attack forces them back.

~

Wei Wuxian knows the power an immortal wields. He was raised by one and then two of them and he grew up with the pressure of their golden cores as a familiar weight.

But as the effects of each verse of the battle song crush the Wen, he thinks that he may have mistaken familiarity for understanding.

He's played Aunt Yi's guqin before. He learned on this guqin, plucked out his first clumsy chords on it with Aunt Yi's hands on his shoulders. It's almost baffling to him now, that she let him play on it when this is what it was capable of.

Aunt Baoshan had buildings to put up and children to raise and train and her friends' descendants to check up on and learn from. She may have spent most of her time on the mountain, but she had plenty to do.

Aunt Yi didn't have that. She lived in the cave and survived off inedia, only briefly leaving a handful of times for supplies and even then never straying outside the bounds of Cloud Recesses. All she had to fill the rest of the long years of her self-imposed exile was meditating and training.

Her guqin holds several hundred years of refined power, ready to be released as soon as he plucks the right combination of strings.

He wishes she would have *told* him that. He would have panicked a lot less and not stolen everyone's hair ornaments.

The others swarm in front of him as he builds the song back up again, Lan Zhan dispersing Chord Assassination which does a great job of disorienting and breaking up anyone it doesn't kill. Jiang Cheng, Jin Zixuan, Mianmian, and Fen Zirui are leading the attacks in between Lan Zhan's hits with the other disciples providing back up to them.

They're surrounded by dead Wen while so far none of them have gotten more than a scratch, which seems like a good sign, but they're tiring. They're all skilled, but they're young, and there are so many Wen left.

There's some commotion from the back and Jin Zixuan and his cousin turn themselves toward it, swords extended and ready. Except four Wen go down at once revealing a cultivator he doesn't know and one he definitely does.

"Xingchen-ge!" he shouts out joyously, not waving only because his hands are otherwise occupied by playing. Their audience catches up with him, and he continues, "Er, who I know from my time as a rogue cultivator and not for any other reason."

Nie Hua says, "Oh for fuck's sake," in between stabbing a cultivator twice her size and he's going to choose to believe that it's not directed at him.

The Jin and Jiang part enough for Xingchen-ge and the man next to him to come forward while beating back the Wen. Lan Zhan gives a warning and then they're all falling back as he performs another Chord Assassination.

Xingchen-ge rushes towards him, gripping the back of his neck and demanding, "What's going on? When did you leave the mountain and why didn't you come to find me instead of ending up *here*?"

"I've missed you," Wei Wuxian says, hopefully quietly enough that no one overhears it. "I'm pretending to be the first disciple of the Jiang. I'll explain later. Who's your friend?"

"Ying-di," Xingchen-ge sighs. His grin in response is not appropriate considering their situation, but he can't help it. "His name is Song Lan. I'll introduce you later."

He finishes another verse which takes out another wave of the Wen disciples and Xingchen-ge yanks on the end of his ponytail before joining the fight. He'd been worried before, but now with Xingchen-ge and Song Lan here, it's almost embarrassing how one sided the fight becomes.

An hour later, Mianmian kills the last Wen cultivator and he and Lan Zhan banish their guqins. while everyone else cleans off their swords. He gives everyone a quick once over, and aside from some cuts and what's probably going to end up being a colorful collection of bruises, they're unharmed.

Wei Wuxian is feeling really good about everything until he turns around to see what looks like the entirety of Cloud Recesses pressed against the edge of his wards, Lan Qiren front and center with his arms crossed.

Obviously none of them had looked up the hill towards the Cloud Recesses during the fight. It would be foolish to turn their back on the enemy for longer than absolutely necessary.

Wen Qing is standing next to Yanli-jie, who gives him a smile and a thumbs up. It's not as encouraging as she's probably hoping it is.

"Ah," Lan Zhan says, softly enough that Wei Wuxian probably wouldn't have heard him if he wasn't standing so close. Lan Xichen isn't smiling.

He throws his arm around Lan Zhan's shoulders and says, "I could keep the wards up until they promise not to yell at us."

Mianmian snorts. Lan Zhan's silence is a little too close to contemplation for his comfort, but he just shakes his head.

Oh well.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He's in so much trouble.

“Wangji,” Xichen says, gripping his shoulders, “are you okay? Why did you follow them? What were you thinking?”

“I am okay,” he says, and then doesn't say anything else.

Wei Ying had sounded scared and he'd run so Lan Wangji had followed. What he'd been thinking is that he didn't want Wei Ying to face whatever he was afraid of alone.

But there's no way he's going to say that out loud. Even to his brother.

Meng Yao is reprimanding Nie Hua and Fen Zirui, gesticulating with Nie Huaisang's fan for some reason and hitting them on the arm with it several times. Meng Yao barely comes up to their shoulders and has spent the past couple of months acting like a servant, but the both of them are taking their scolding with their heads lowered and acting appropriately contrite. Lan Wangji doesn't think they're actually contrite, and Meng Yao must agree because his voice is rising to the closest to yelling he's ever heard from him.

The Jiang disciples rush towards each other, looking each other over for injuries and yelling at one another in increasing volume to be heard over everyone else. There's a complete lack of propriety, the junior disciples poking and prodding at Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli respectively as if they're not clan heirs.

Wei Wuxian escapes a similar fate by rushing past them to Wen Qing, grabbing her upper arms, and lifting her into the air.

It's very inappropriate for him to be jealous right now.

“Wen Qing! What happened to you, you're all – oh no, Wen Ning, you too?” He puts down Wen Qing just to bat ineffectually at Wen Ning's face, possibly trying to rub off some of the blood smudged along his jaw but not doing a very good job of it.

There are sect rules against envy. He just can't remember them right now.

“Wei Wuxian, stop that,” Wen Qing says, shoving his arms back down to his sides. “We're fine. Are you?”

Wei Ying waves his hand, as if that's a ridiculous question, and Uncle says, “If you're uninjured, perhaps you'd like to explain how you were able to tamper with our wards and whose guqin you were using?”

Some of the chatter dies down, everyone looking towards Wei Ying in interest, except for the Jiang siblings who seem nervous at the question. Which means they already know the answer, while everyone else doesn't.

Wei Ying being the Jiang first disciple seems more and more plausible every time he sees him and the Jiang interact. Lan Wangji knows he isn't, that it doesn't make any sense for it to be true, but that Wei Ying and the Jiang have formed such a strong bond so quickly seems equally unlikely. One of them has to be true.

There's a long, uncomfortable beat of silence. Then Wei Ying presses the back of his hand to his forehead and says, "Oh no – the ground – it's spinning!" He dramatically falls backwards and Wen Ning has to hastily grab the front of his robes and yank him into his chest to keep him from falling to the ground.

Lan Wangji is going to copy the rule about inappropriately coveting what isn't his to covet one hundred times. Possibly while doing a handstand.

"Oh, A-Xian!" Jiang Yanli gasps loudly, hurrying over to his side. Jiang Cheng coughing into his hand to cover his smirk really isn't helping anything. "Master Lan, he's so exhausted from defending you and everyone in here from being slaughtered by Wen soldiers. Perhaps we can question him another time?"

All the Jiang have widened their eyes, adopting concerned and pleading poses. Except for Jiang Cheng, who's ducked behind Nie Huaisang in an attempt to hide his laughter. An obviously flawed plan, considering Nie Huaisang is several inches shorter than him.

Uncle and Xichen are not at all moved by this display. If anything, he thinks his uncle might even be grinding his teeth.

"He can rest in the jingshi," he says. "I will keep an eye on him, Uncle. You can question him when he wakes up."

Uncle pinches the bridge of his nose, which is typically the precursor to him getting a punishment that will leave him sore for several days. But instead he just says, "Fine, Wangji. *Don't* let him out of your sight."

Not a problem.

"I suppose we should get started on the clean up," Uncle continues then slides his eyes over to Xiao Xingcheng and Song Lan. "I'd appreciate your assistance. Since you're here."

Why are you here? is the extremely obvious unasked question, but instead of answering they both give shallow bows and turn to start collecting what's left of the Wen bodies. Lan Wangji assumes the quick agreement comes from not wanting to explain how they ended up here, although he's also curious. Wei Ying had been surprised to see them too, so it hadn't been something he'd planned.

"We'll help too," Wen Qing says, she looks to her brother. "Give Wei Wuxian to Lan Wangji."

Wen Ning leans down to pick up Wei Ying's legs so he's holding him in a bridal carry and then stretches out his arms, offering Wei Ying to him.

There aren't enough lines in the world to make up for his thought process right now. Uncle is going to have to punish him until he's his age at this rate.

He knows that Wei Ying isn't actually passed out, but he's doing a very good imitation of it, his body heavy and pliant. Lan Wangji adjusts his hold until Wei Ying's head is against his shoulder, which ends up being a mistake.

Lan Wangji turns around and starts walking towards his home and when they're a dozen steps away from the crowd, Wei Ying opens his mouth and blows a raspberry against his neck, his mouth warm and wet and his teeth sharp against his skin.

He should probably just turn in his forehead ribbon.

Jiang Yanli is following them, which is likely for the best. He feels as if he needs a chaperone.

~

There are no records of Baoshan Sanren playing the guqin.

There's plenty happening, and even more that needs his attention, but Lan Qiren can't help the niggling sensation that things aren't fitting together properly.

They have plenty of historical documents about the immortal, fractured and inconsistent as they might be. She and Lan An had been good friends from all accounts and for a while she'd lingered in the mortal world, dropping in on Lans who could never refuse a visit from their founder's sworn sister. Lan Yi had reportedly been close with her, but the records are rather – sparse, from the time period.

There's no proof that Baoshan Sanren killed Lan Yi. But the disappearance of both Lan Yi and Baoshan Sanren at about the same time, and considering exactly what her notes from that time looked like, it seems obvious.

He supposes that Baoshan Sanren could have picked up the guqin during the decades she not only knew Lan An but lingered around Cloud Recesses. But there's nothing that *says* that, and someone would have noticed, someone would have thought that notable enough to write down.

More than that, he thinks that Cangse Sanren would have said something. She hadn't talked often of her master, but she had mentioned her, had been just as insufferable and talented as her son is now.

Lan Qiren had seen that sword style exhibition once before, although Cangse Sanren hadn't been able to convince the other clans to help her demonstrate them when she'd done it.

Cangse Sanren hadn't hidden her status as Baoshan Sanren's disciple either. Xiao Xingchen has always been open about his origin. He doesn't understand why Wei Wuxian isn't, what it

is that he could possibly be hiding that he doesn't want to be known as Baoshan Sanren's disciple.

Had the immortal kicked him off her mountain? Are the Jiang working with Baoshan Sanren? Is he only pretending to be badly lying about being Baoshan Sanren's disciple and is actually a secret cultivator raised the Wen clan to infiltrate Cloud Recesses and kill them all?

The last one, at least, seems unlikely.

But Lan Qiren doesn't *know*. All he knows is that Wei Wuxian is more powerful than any boy his age has a right to be and that he's lying. It's not a good combination.

And that guqin he'd used – and the skill he's used it with – does nothing to settle his nerves.

“Uncle,” Xichen says, angling himself so no one can see him reaching out to tug on his sleeve in concern. “Are you alright?”

Such a well behaved, attentive boy, who doesn't run away with dangerous, lying cultivators and fight armies on his own.

When everything settles he's going to make Wangji stay in a handstand until he collapses.

“Light the pyre,” he says instead of answering.

Who could have taught Wei Wuxian those songs? He's not even going to think about the wards right now. He already has a headache.

~

Nie Huaisang does his best to keep from being beaten to death by A-Yao, which mostly means running away. He's originally been planning to hide in the dorms, but there's still an awful lot of blood and dead bodies there right now. Wen Ning has helpfully stacked the bodies all together and it looks like he mopped up the blood from his sister's massacre, but he seems to have not taken into account that many of the bodies are still ... leaking.

His next stop is the girls dorms. Pretty much everyone is still trying to clean up the mess of the battle, so he doesn't think they'll mind. He'll just stay in his cousin's room.

He's feeling really proud of himself up until he closes Nie Hua's door behind him to see Meng Yao sitting on her bed and glaring at him. “Forgot about the corpses, didn't you?”

There's a nonzero chance that he's faster than A-Yao. He could sprint and hope for the best.

Except once he gets back to the Unclean Realm, A-Yao will definitely make him regret it. He's the only one that can get away with punishing him besides Mingjue. He does it far less often, but that just means he saves it for when Nie Huaisang really pisses him off.

“Maybe,” he says sullenly, crossing his arms.

A-Yao narrows his eyes. “If you’d come to me with a problem, I wouldn’t have told Lan Xichen.”

“You like him,” he says and winces. He’d really meant to keep that bitterness in his head out and off his lips.

His eyebrows dip together. “Am I not a Nie general? Did your brother not send me specifically to keep you out of trouble? How I feel about Lan Xichen is inconsequential. You are my responsibility.”

Responsibility. Right.

A-Yao huffs and pinches the bridge of his nose. Normally getting him to this level of frustration would put a smile on his face, but Nie Huaisang can’t manage it just then. “What is Sect Leader Nie going to say when he hears about this?”

“It’s just us,” he grumbles, “you can just call him by his name.”

A-Yao raises an eyebrow then takes a deep breath. “Okay. What is Mingjue going to say when he hears that I didn’t know what you were getting up to? That you didn’t trust me enough to tell me? That our clan members were in a battle and I didn’t know anything about it and couldn’t protect them?”

Oh. Shit.

“It’s not your fault,” he says. “I’ll tell him that it’s because of me. He won’t blame you. He – um, don’t worry, he won’t.”

He loves A-Yao. He won’t blame him.

“That still doesn’t explain why you didn’t tell me in the first place,” and oh no, he doesn’t sound mad anymore, but this is even worse. “You think a couple kisses from Lan Xichen is enough for me to forget my place?”

“He KISSED YOU?” Nie Huaisang screeches.

A-Yao rubs at his forehead. “Stop trying to change the subject and talk to me.”

“Who does he think he is?” he snaps, nearly vibrating in place. “He can’t – without discussing it with us, just because he’s the clan heir – Mingjue is the clan head! So! Can’t he see? Don’t his eyes work? You’re in Nie robes and Nie braids and he’s not allowed to kiss you!”

It takes about five seconds of silence for Nie Huaisang’s sense to catch up with him. He shouldn’t have said it like that, now A-Yao is going to be mad at him and Lan Xichen is going to be mad at him and Mingjue is going to be fucking furious.

“You’ve really been worried about this,” A-Yao says. He doesn’t sound mad. “It’s not serious, Huaisang. There’s no reason for him to talk to Mingjue about it.”

A-Yao is really smart. He should know better. “Lan Xichen wouldn’t risk upsetting Mingjue if he wasn’t serious.”

“No one is upsetting Mingjue,” A-Yao says. He steps forward and grabs his wrist, forcing Nie Huaisang to sit next to him on the bed. “I like Lan Xichen. He’s a good friend and a good kisser. But you’re right – I’m Nie. Now stop panicking about something that’s never going to happen and tell me everything you know about this attempted attack by the Wen and how you got involved.”

Nie Huaisang isn’t completely convinced. Kissing or no kissing, he’s known Lan Xichen his whole life, and he’s never seen him interested in someone the way he’s interested in A-Yao. But it’s enough that A-Yao thinks it and that he’s not planning on leaving.

He won’t betray Wei Wuxian’s trust by telling A-Yao any of the thing he’s guessed, even if he’s certain he’s right, but there’s no reason to dig in his heels about how Wen Qing asked Wei Wuxian and Jiang Yanli for help and it all spiraled from there, so he doesn’t.

He starts talking. A-Yao knows him well enough to know that he’s holding something back, but their previous conversation must have unbalanced him at least a little bit, because he doesn’t push.

~

Wei Wuxian is flipping through all of Lan Zhan’s books and despairing at the state of them. Nothing but dull poetry, sword forms, and even duller philosophy written by past Lans. He doesn’t find anything written by Aunt Yi, which is a bit of a disappointment. Possibly it’s because of her stint with experimenting with Yin Iron made her an unsuitable subject for moral teachings, but also very possibly because all her poetry was dirty limericks about Aunt Baoshan.

He should borrow some books from Nie Huaisang for Lan Zhan’s bookshelf. It’s important for a young man to receive a well rounded education.

“You’re not going to be able to hide forever, A-Xian,” Yanli-jie says, kneeling at Lan Zhan’s table and making tea. Lan Zhan is hovering anxiously, likely because he’s breaking some Lan rule about hospitality by letting her brew the tea rather than doing it himself.

“I don’t have to hide forever,” he says, abandoning looking through Lan Zhan’s things for now so he can sprawl next to her. Just until Aunt Yi comes back. “Do you think your parents have heard about everything yet? Are they going to be mad?”

Yanli-jie goes completely still, nearly overflowing a cup before jerking the teapot upright. “Ah.”

He shares a startled look with Lan Zhan, trying to think of every rumor he’s ever heard of the Jiang, but none of that matches up with her reaction. Sect Leader Jiang is, by all accounts, remarkably easy going for someone in his position, although then again Jiang sect leaders usually are. “Yanli-jie?”

“She’ll probably stay home,” she says, but there’s a distant look in her eyes like she’s not seeing them. He doesn’t think she’s talking to them. “She doesn’t like leaving the pier, and really, it’s not smart for both of them to leave if they’re worried about the Wen.”

Did something happen while he and Jiang Cheng were fighting? He hopes she didn’t hit her head. Wen Qing had been standing right next to her, if something had happened then she would have healed her. He reaches out to grab her forearm. “Are you okay?”

She startles, blinking several times before an uneasy smile spreads across her face. “Of course I am, A-Xian.” She presses the too full cup of tea into his hands and he immediately spills some on himself. She did that on purpose.

Yanli-jie pours another cup of tea then forces it into Lan Zhan’s hands. She stands, smoothing her hands down the front of her skirt. “I just have to – um, take care of something, really quick. If anyone asks, I’ll tell them that you’re still recuperating. Be good for Lan Wangji.”

“Yanli-jie!” he tries, putting down the tea and scrambling to his feet, but Yanli-jie can move quickly when she wants to. She’s already out the door and there’s probably not anyone watching Lan Zhan’s home, but if there is then him running out after Yanli-jie will make it really obvious that he’s awake.

He huffs and sits back down at the space she’d just left, sprawling so he can press his leg up against Lan Zhan’s. “I wonder what that was about.”

Lan Zhan hums and drinks his tea. Apparently he doesn’t have any opinions about Yanli-jie’s behavior, or more likely he has an opinion and it involves some sort of rude gossip that it breaks a rule to repeat.

Wei Wuxian pulls the leg not touching Lan Zhan to his chest so he can lean against it then sips at the tea. It’s bland, but he assumes it’s all that Yanli-jie had to work with. It’s not bitter, at least.

The silence isn’t awkward or uncomfortable, but Wei Wuxian can’t let it linger. “You haven’t asked me anything.”

Lan Zhan looks into his tea cup and remains silent.

“You haven’t asked me anything,” he repeats. “You didn’t even know what you were following us into or what I’d done, and you helped us, and you’re not going to ask?”

He shrugs. “Your actions were to protect Cloud Recesses and my clansmen. Demands are not in accordance with gratitude.”

That’s definitely a rule, but Wei Wuxian isn’t buying it.

Lan Zhan sighs and lifts his head to meet his eyes. “You lie.”

“Hey!” he says but then doesn’t know where to go from here. He does lie. He has to lie.

“I do not want your lies,” he continues, and it’s something that should be said meanly, but Lan Zhan just sounds gentle. “I trust you. There is no need for you to lie to me. So I will not ask.”

Wei Wuxian gapes. “But if you know I’m lying – er, if you think I’m lying – then how can you trust me? That doesn’t make any sense!”

He doesn’t so much as blink. “If someone’s actions do not match their words, then it’s not their words that I’ll rely on. It makes perfect sense. Wei Ying is trustworthy.”

“Isn’t there a rule against baseless optimism or something?” he asks, throat tight.

Lan Zhan lifts his cup to take another sip. “There is not.”

Wei Wuxian is going to miss him so much when he has to go back home.

~

The Dafan Wens have control of the Nightless City which means it’s time for them to go and make sure their child is still in one piece.

“You’re coming?” Lan Yi asks, eyes wide. “Don’t you have to – I thought, that this was just an exception.”

“You are my exception,” Baoshan Sanren says fondly, reaching out to straighten Lan Yi’s robes even though they don’t need it. “You went to your cave and so I retreated to my mountain. But you’re here. Why would I be anywhere else?” An unpleasant thought makes worry spike through her. “You’re not going to continue hiding, are you?”

Lan Yi shakes her head. “I couldn’t even if I wanted to. I left my guqin with Wuxian and told him how to get into the secret library. They won’t believe him if I don’t show up.”

“He could talk his way out of it,” Baoshan Sanren says confidently. Honestly, she’ll be surprised if he bothered to try and explain it at all. Even with the backing of Jiang Yanli, the truth is too strange to be believable. Lan Yi isn’t thinking of that because she’s spent hundreds of years being too strange to be believable, but Wei Wuxian has spent enough time off her mountain to know better.

Lan Yi elbows her in the side. “That doesn’t matter. He has us. He doesn’t have to.”

“That’s true,” she murmurs, grabbing onto her elbow and pulling Lan Yi closer so she can press their foreheads together. “He does have us.”

They should hurry up and go save Wuxian from getting into any more trouble, but Baoshan Sanren thinks he won’t begrudge them a few extra minutes.

Just long enough for her to kiss Lan Yi breathless.

~

“Jin Zixuan,” Jiang Yanli says, pushing her way into his room, “I need-”

Oh.

“To learn to knock?” Jin Zixun asks crankily, but most of the bite she’s used to hearing in his voice is gone.

Jin Zixuan is sitting on the edge of his bed, naked from the waist up and his hair pulled over his shoulder as his cousin wipes at a wound curling around the swell of his shoulder. She feels heat pull to her face, and considers backing away and pretending this never happened, but instead she swallows and lifts her chin.

She’ll see far more than his chest when they’re married, after all.

“You’re hurt,” she says, hoping that her voice comes out even. “I didn’t see you get hit.”

“Um,” he flushes, the redness starting at his neck and creeping downwards. “It was in the beginning, before we got – there was a rhythm to it, in the end, but it took us a bit.”

“I see,” she says, even though she doesn’t. She doesn’t have much experience with combat and if there’s a pattern to it then it’s one she never learned. “The Lan have healers.”

Jin Zixuan looks away from her and mumbles something that she can’t quite make out.

She waits to see if he’ll repeat himself, but instead the silence stretches out. “What was that?”

He mumbles again and she still can’t understand him.

Jin Zixun rolls his eyes. “They’re mean and they make us eat gross soup and the wound isn’t even that bad. It’ll be mostly healed by the morning.”

Of course it will. Jin Zixuan has a strong golden core, so injuries and illness mean little to him. He’s probably never even had a cold.

“You’re being too rough,” she says, stepping fully into the room. She holds out her hand for the cloth. “Let me.”

Jin Zixun looks rapidly between her outstretched hand and Jin Zixuan before huffing, slapping it into her palm, and stomping towards the door. “Whatever, I have better things to do anyway.”

He slams the door shut behind him, leaving her and Jin Zixuan alone together. It’s not proper. Or maybe it is. He is her future husband. If she’s going to be alone with any man outside of her clan, then it would have to be him. The rumors would be intolerable if it was with anyone else.

Jiang Yanli dampens the cloth with water from his bedside table, ignoring the way the blood spreads and smears across her hands. She sits on the bed next to Jin Zixuan, who’s looking straight ahead and so tense that she doesn’t think it can be comfortable.

Maybe she should leave.

He hasn't told her to leave.

The wound is barely bleeding now, starting at the top of his shoulder and curling to nearly his inner elbow. If she had a wound like this then she'd need stitches, but she's grown up around enough strong cultivators to know it would only make the healing worse if she tried. Instead she dabs it clean, holding it against his skin when the removal of dirt, sweat, and dried blood causes it to start bleeding anew. She doesn't have a bandage, but for an injury so small on a cultivator as strong as Jin Zixun, pressure and time will do the job just as well.

"What do you need?"

She looks up to find Jin Zixun staring at her, his lips pulled down into a frown. He's always frowning at her, but for once it doesn't feel personal. "What?"

"You said you needed something, when you came in," he says. He's so warm underneath her hands. "What is it?"

"Oh," she swallows. "I want to tell my father that everything's fine before the rumors can get to him. Can you send a messenger butterfly for me?"

"I can," he says. She frowns and he adds, "I will."

Jiang Yanli lifts the cloth. The wound has stopped bleeding. "Thank you."

~

They have a room in Caiyi, but Xiao Xingchen graciously accepts the offer of a room in Cloud Recesses for him and Song Lan because he still doesn't know what's going on with Ying-di and he's not going to leave until he finds out. He can only hide for so long before Lan Qiren loses his patience and drags him out in front of everyone, fake faint or not.

He's surprised that Lan Qiren let Ying-di get away with that, but he supposes that's what having to clean up and dispose of that many corpses will do. Especially since Ying-di had gone off with Lan Wangji, and Lan Qiren could obviously trust his nephew to keep an eye on him.

Although. Lan Wangji *had* been one of the kids fighting off the Wens and clearly hadn't told his uncle or brother why.

"Stop thinking so loudly," Song Lan mumbles, his face pressed into the pillow. "It's too early."

"The Lans should be getting up soon anyway," he says, walking over to the window to look at the slow creep of the sun over the horizon. "I need to speak to Ying-di alone. Acting Sect Leader Lan's questions and my own are not the same. Why is he pretending to be the first disciple of the Jiang? Why are they letting him? When did he leave the mountain, and why didn't he come to me? It can't have been that long ago."

Ying-di is too remarkable to go unnoticed for long. But that means that even if Ying-di didn't know how to find him, then he should have heard of him. Or at least Song Lan should have, since he's the one that pays attention to those sorts of things.

"Um," Song Lan says, jerking Xiao Xingchen out of his thoughts. Song Lan isn't lying in bed anymore, instead standing next to him with a very concerning look on his face. "Maybe I need more sleep. I don't think I'm awake yet."

"It's not that early," he protests, trying to sound exasperated, but he can hear the fondness in his own voice.

Song Lan lifts a hand and points out the window.

Xiao Xingchen follows his finger to the horizon and freezes, blinking rapidly in case it makes what he's seeing start to make sense, but he has no such luck.

Master Baoshan is flying towards them, sharing her sword with a Lan woman he doesn't recognize. She's wearing her typical white robes heavily embroidered in silver with her pure white hair flying out behind her, the combination so notorious that her identity is obvious even to people who don't know her face.

Somehow, he just knows that this is Ying-di's fault.

"Come on," he says, grabbing Song Lan's wrist and tugging him towards the door.

Except Song Lan resists, yanking his hand away and scrambling backwards. "No, I have to get changed! I can't meet your mo-master like this!"

It's so out of character for him that Xiao Xingchen can only stare. "Okay. Um, hurry? Please?"

Song Lan gives a sharp nod and then hurries to pull off his robe. Xiao Xingchen watches as they descend, landing in what he thinks is the main courtyard of Cloud Recesses. That means whoever this Lan is, she at least has a jade token, so she probably really is a Lan and isn't just dressed like one.

By the time they make it down there, Master Baoshan has her arms crossed and is tapping her foot impatiently while the Lan woman gives her an exasperated look. "He's probably still asleep. They did fight a battle yesterday. Give him some time."

"What does that have to do with anything?" she scoffs. "You did most of the work and you weren't even there."

It's been years since he's seen Master Baoshan. He never thought that he'd see her again, but she's been frozen by immortality for hundreds of years, and if he had he'd have thought that she would look the same as when he saw her last. But something about her is different. Lighter.

The Lan woman sees him first and her smile freezes before widening. She nudges Master Baoshan in the side. "Well, at least one of our children is prompt."

She's frowning when she turns to face him, but that frown instantly slips into a smile when her eyes meet his. "Xingchen! What are you doing here? Come here."

"Master Baoshan," he greets, starting to go into a formal bow.

She grips his elbows then yanks him forward into a hug, her arms encircling him and squeezing him so tightly that he's instantly transported back into being a kid again, back when in his master's arms was the safest place he knew.

He's an adult now. But he thinks that maybe that's still true.

"Why did you leave the mountain?" he asks, refusing to feel disappointed when she pulls back. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

Master Baoshan waves a dismissive hand. "Don't worry, it's just your younger brother causing problems, as usual."

The Lan woman frowns. "I don't think he can reasonably be said to have caused these problems. Exacerbated them, perhaps."

"Stop defending him," she glares. "You have to be on my side. I've known you longer."

She rolls her eyes, but is saved by responding with an excited voice yelling out, "Aunt Yi! You're back!"

They all turn to see Ying-di hurrying up the path, his robes disheveled and sloppily tied with his hair uncombed and flying out behind him. There's a little paperman clinging to his collar. Lan Wangji follows behind him at a more sedate pace, perfectly put together and unbothered.

The moment Ying-di sees Master Baoshan, he lunges for Lan Wangji and slaps a hand over his eyes. A wasted gesture, since Lan Wangji has already seen them, and Xiao Xingchen feels like covering his own face in despair.

"Wei Ying?" Lan Wangji asks, unbothered by Ying-di groping his face.

Xiao Xingchen's eyes narrow. He hadn't noticed that yesterday. The second jade of Lan is speaking to his younger brother in an awfully familiar fashion. Maybe he should have been more worried at the two of them spending the night under one roof.

"Wuxian, what are you doing?" Master Baoshan snaps. "Knock that off and come over here so I can beat you."

He scoffs. "What am I doing? What are *you* doing? If you wanted me to come home, then you could have told Aunt Yi! Or something! What if someone sees you?"

Aunt Yi. The Lan woman is Lan Yi. That explains several things and raises questions about several others.

"I came here so they could see me. How else am I supposed to explain you running around and causing a mess about everything?" she asks.

Outrage steals across Ying-di's face and he removes his hands from Lan Wangji's face to place them on his hips. "I didn't cause any mess! I helped clean up the mess! You can't blame me for things I didn't do, none of this is my fault!"

"None of it, huh?" Master Baoshan's eyes narrow in a way that usually meant they were going to be running drills until one of them collapsed. "So all this time running around villages, sneaking in to see Lan Yi, and sticking your nose into anything interesting you came across, and all of this has *nothing* to do with you?"

Xiao Xingchen blinks. "You've left the mountain before? Ying-di! Have you no respect for your status as an immortal's disciple?" He turns to Master Baoshan. "You should have thrown him out after the first time."

Master Baoshan is cackling but now Ying-di is directing his outrage towards him. "Excuse me? I've been leaving the mountain for years! Just because you never bothered to question where all the chili oil came from-"

Master Baoshan coughs and Ying-di's mouth slams shut as he looks up, suddenly fascinated with the sky and refusing to look in his direction.

He'd never thought about the chili oil before. "How long have you been leaving the mountain?"

Ying-di refuses to answer him. He turns to Master Baoshan.

She looks between them and says, "It's all about choosing your own path and having the room to make your own choices-"

"THE WHOLE TIME?" he shouts. "You were just letting Ying-di roam around all on his own? He's a kid! What if something happened to him?"

"It was just to the village at first," she defends at the same time that Ying-di says, "Hey! I can take care of myself! I didn't even get involved in that many night hunts on my own."

"You did nighthunts on your own?" Master Baoshan asks dangerously, eyes narrowed. "You didn't search them out, did you? All those times you told me you just stumbled across something-"

"Anyway!" Ying-di says loudly, "hello everyone, this is Lan Wangji. Lan Zhan, this is Aunt Baoshan, Aunt Yi, and my brother Xingchen-ge, and his, er, partner Song Lan."

Why that pause before partner? Song Lan is his partner. Ying-di and Song Lan have barely even met, what does Ying-di think that that he's implying?

"Hello," Lan Yi says, inclining her head to Song Lan who responds with a deep bow. "Lan Wangji, I've heard so much about you."

Ying-di shoots her a betrayed look that she pretends not to see.

Xiao Xingchen isn't really sure how the immortal that everyone thought was dead is still alive and how she knows both Master Baoshan and Ying-di, but he thinks he likes her.

"It's a pleasure to meet all of you as well," Lan Wangji returns, bowing. He's handling meeting two immortals with surprising grace. "I believe it would be best for you to speak to my uncle. He has many questions."

Ying-di pulls a move that Xiao Xingchen has never seen anyone but a Lan do and summons a shimmering guqin in front of him. "Here, Aunt Yi. Thank you."

"It worked, then?" she asks, smiling as she picks up the guqin and it disappears in her hands.

"Really well," he answers, and Xiao Xingchen has to agree with the awe he can hear in his brother's voice. Watching Ying-di wield that guqin had been terrifying. "If I'd known that was going to happen, I wouldn't have messed with the wards."

Lan Yi blinks. "What did you do with the wards?"

Lan Wangji snorts and Wei Wuxian unsubtly stomps on his foot. "Nothing, don't worry about it, we should really go see Lan Qiren--"

"Oh, was it not Lady Lan's intention to trap all of Cloud Recesses behind the safety of the wards while a handful of teenagers faced the Wen army on their own?" Xiao Xingchen asks.

He doesn't feel at all bad about this. Ying-di has been going up and down the mountain since they were children!

"You did what?" Lan Yi demands. Nothing much about her expression changes, but it feels like the temperature drops at least ten degrees.

"I told you," Master Baoshan says smugly. "Also, Wuxian, I'm going make you run drills until a limb falls off. Maybe if you have a little less energy, you'll cause less problems."

"Uncle tried that," Lan Wangji says. He snaps his mouth shut and red creeps up his neck towards his ears. Master Baoshan is laughing and Lan Yi presses her lips together, likely to prevent the same.

Ying-di whines, "Lan Zhan!" and goes on his tip toes to dramatically drape himself over Lan Wangji's shoulders.

Even if all he does is cause trouble, Xiao Xingchen is glad that Ying-di is here.

He's missed his brother.

~

Lan Qiren really isn't prepared for two immortals in his house. Xichen at least has the good sense to be surprised and nervous when he arrives, while Wangji is just acting like all this is perfectly normal. Lan Qiren sits patiently as they explain all those things that had seemed

unexplainable to him, and he despairs that the truth is actually so much stranger than anything he'd thought up.

He shifts his gaze onto Wei Wuxian. "A rogue cultivator, hm?"

"Technically," he starts, pointing a finger towards the sky for emphasis.

Baoshan Sanren cuts him off by whacking him upside the head without looking at him. Wei Wuxian yelps and clutches his head, pouting in a way that makes him look a quarter his age.

This explains several things about Cangse Sanren. Clearly Xiao Xingchen is the outlier here

"Lady Lan," he says after several moments deliberating how to address her. She's not the sect leader anymore, but she was, and she was taught by Lan An. It seems a shade too informal, but she doesn't seem offended. Clearly she can't be that concerned with formalities if she's letting Wei Wuxian call her aunt. "We were under the impression that you'd died at Baoshan Sanren's hand after sealing away the Yin Iron."

The silence takes on a decidedly awkward air.

Wei Wuxian snorts. "This is what happens when you seal yourself in a cave and run away to a mountain without talking to anyone."

This time, Wei Wuxian dodges Baoshan Sanren's slap, but doesn't manage to avoid her kick to his shin. Xichen looks down to hide his smile while Wangji lets his lips quirk up in the corners in front of everyone, which is a new behavior.

"Well," Lan Yi clears her throat. "Clearly that's not what happened, although I can see how people could have come to that conclusion."

They're going to have to revise so many texts. "Yes. I see. Where do we go from here, Lady Lan?"

He can't beat two immortals in a fight. He'd be surprised if he could even give one of them a good workout. He could have been a great cultivator, perhaps, but the responsibilities and bureaucracies of running a sect don't leave much time for training. He's not ashamed of his skills, but no one will be writing of him in any of the history books.

"I have no interest in interfering with the clan," Lan Yi says firmly, understanding exactly what he's asking. His nephews startle, like that possibility hadn't even occurred to them. "I am Lan. You are my sect and my family. If you ever have need of me, I will come, and if there's a war then I'll fight with you. But I've missed so much of the world over the years, and I want to see it once more."

She reaches out to take Baoshan Sanren's hand and the two immortals share a look that Lan Qiren wishes he didn't have to witness. So it's like that, then.

"We're going traveling?" Wei Wuxian asks. "What about the mountain? People are going to talk."

Wangji looks away then. Xichen tries to catch his brother's attention and frowns when he can't.

"Baoshan and I are going traveling," Lan Yi says gently. "You're welcome to come with us, of course, and it's likely that Xingchen will be joining us. But things are different now, Wuxian. Baoshan has left her mountain. You don't have to choose between a life with us or a life dictated by your own desires."

Wei Wuxian blinks, mouth falling open, and Wangji's head snaps to his direction.

The door slams open and several teenagers burst inside. He barely catches a glimpse of Nie Huaisang rolling his eyes before running away. What's the use of having a patrol if they don't catch people eaves dropping on his conversations?

"You're staying?" Jiang Cheng demands. "You have to! I'll talk to my dad about you really being our first disciple, you're doing the work already-"

Wen Qing slaps his shoulder. "Why did you open the door? You could have waited and now we've been caught-"

"Qing-jie, please," Wen Ning says, ineffectually tugging on his sister's sleeve in a poor attempt at preventing her from hitting Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Yanli rushes forward and falls to her knees in front of Wei Wuxian, grabbing his hands in her own. "Oh, A-Xian, don't go! You'll really love Lotus Pier, and we can go swimming together and I'll cook for you and everyone loves you, please don't go!"

Wei Wuxian stares at Jiang Yanli then turns to Jiang Cheng, who's watching him with an equally pleading expression. He swallows. "Aunt Baoshan, you really don't mind?"

Baoshan Sanren shakes her head, her expression soft. "You will always be my child and I hope your mother believes I've raised you well. But you are your father's son too. There is nothing dishonorable about you joining the Jiang, if that's what you want to do."

Wei Wuxian's grin is so large that it's nearly splitting his face in half. "Okay. I – okay."

The Jiang siblings tackle him in their excitement while the Wens use the distraction to make a very unsubtle escape.

Lan Qiren can't even cause that much of a fuss about anything since he doesn't want to offend the two immortals, but Wangji is smiling again, so he doesn't much want to either.

He can't wait for the foreign disciples to go home so that things can get back to normal around here.

~

So much has happened since Wei Wuxian first took her to the cold springs that Jiang Yanli had nearly forgotten what started all of this in the first place. When the two immortals ask to examine her, she agrees, but brings her brothers with her. It's not that she doesn't trust

Baoshan Sanren and Lan Yi, of course, it's just that she wants Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian with her. Whatever happens.

Baoshan Sanren presses her fingers to her wrist, activates several talismans over her, and trades a grimace with Lan Yi that makes her instantly nauseous with worry. "Is it that bad?"

"No, of course not," Baoshan Sanren hurries to assure her, but her smile isn't as comforting as it would have been a moment ago. "You weren't born breathing."

A-Cheng shoots a sharp glance to the windows, then frowns. "How can you know that?"

"Your mother must have been desperate to save you," Baoshan Sanren says and she knows without looking that she and A-Cheng flinch at the same time. "You should have died. But she must have poured cultivation energy into you, forcing your body to heal itself and quickening your breath. It's very dangerous, especially for someone that's just given birth, and rarely works. At best, the child will make it another couple of days before going cold and the birthing parent tends to follow not long after."

"But Yanli-jie didn't die!" Wei Wuxian says, looking at her anxiously as if she'd turned into a ghost without him noticing.

"Yu Ziyuan is powerful," Baoshan Sanren, "and very reckless. The first year of your life must have been nerve wracking for her. Every time your heart skipped a beat, she would have used her own energy to steady it. This saved your life. But it also meant your core never got the chance to develop normally. The paths your mother carved to your core led not inward, but outward." She gestures to Jiang Yanli's sword. "You've been able to retain very little of the immense power you've spent your life cultivating. Most of it has been directed towards your blade, something outside of yourself that your core was connected to. Without the energy to repair yourself from the constant cultivation, it's affected your physical health as well. Cultivators' ability to heal themselves from the damages of their expanding cultivation powers rises *with* the expansion of those powers. Cultivation energy harms as much as it heals, but you've only ever had the energy for the harm and not the healing."

This is why she can't wield her own sword. Why she mediates and trains and it only ever seems to make her weaker. Why she has never, ever been able to live up to her title as the first born heir of the Jiang.

It's not her fault.

It's not her *fault*!

"If you know what's wrong, then you can fix it, can't you?" A-Cheng asks anxiously.

Lan Yi starts to shake her head, then shrugs. "Not – exactly. Baoshan?"

Baoshan Sanren presses her lips together before sighing. "You have a choice to make, Lady Jiang." She startles at the formal address. Baoshan Sanren must be serious. "You can continue as you are. Outside healing can mitigate some of the damage, but you'll spend the

rest of your life falling ill. You'll be a weak cultivator, but a cultivator still. Or I can burn away the channels of your core that lead outwards."

"Burn away!" Wei Wuxian repeats, horrified. "But she – she needs those!"

"To cultivate," Baoshan Sanren continues gently. "To wield a cultivation blade and move that energy out of her body. Even talismans will be outside of her grasp now. But, Lady Jiang, your core will be able grow. It will stabilize. Most of the damage will be healed and you'll gain the resistance to sickness and wounds that any other cultivator has. But you won't be able to receive any outside healing, so if something happens that your core can't fix, only the standard medicine will be able to help you."

She won't get sick anymore? She won't be dizzy and weak and sore, won't be swept away by illnesses she can't predict or control?

Turning her back on her cultivation is unthinkable. It's a gift and a miracle and something she's cherished and nourished her entire life. Choosing a life away from that warm, steady path is blasphemy among the clans. The things people will say about her will be vicious and mocking.

This could jeopardize her engagement to Jin Zixuan. Her children will have strong cores, but renouncing her cultivation for any reason is grounds enough to break off a marriage, and Jin Zixuan has never seemed enthusiastic about their engagement. She likes him. She wants to marry him, and if she does this, maybe she won't.

She won't get sick anymore.

"Burn them," she says.

"A-jie!" A-Cheng snaps.

She shakes her head and he falls silent. "I will never be a cultivator our family can be proud of. I will never be strong enough to follow you into battle. I can't be the cultivator everyone wants me to be. But I can be *better*. I can live my life."

A-Cheng quiets, his eyes going wide and wet. He swallows before nodding. "Okay, A-jie. If this is what you want."

It is.

She was born breathless and she's been struggling to catch her breath ever since. Maybe after this she'll finally be able to.

"The recovery is an ordeal all on its own," Baoshan Sanren says, resting her hand on Jiang Yanli's back. "Lan Yi and I will accompany you back to Lotus Pier. We'll perform it there and stay with you until you're recovered."

She frowns.

Lan Yi puts her hand on her other shoulder. "This is your decision, Jiang Yanli. If your parents disagree, we'll explain that to them."

The way she says it makes it sounds like that explanation will involved unsheathed blades and image of it alone is enough to make her crack a grin.

"Yeah, Yanli-jie, don't worry!" Wei Wuxian shouts, running forward to give her a hug that lifts her clean off her feet. "A-Cheng and I will be right there with you and everything will be fine!"

She believes him.

Everything is going to be fine.

~

Lan Wangji returns to the jingshi from midnight patrols to find someone sitting on his bed.

He only panics for a second before he registers its Wei Ying, and then his heart beat quickens for an entirely different reason. "You're breaking curfew."

"My name is Wei Ying," he says, jumping up to stand in front of him. He looks warm and comfortable and Lan Wangji wants to touch him. "My parents are Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren. After my parents died, I lived on the streets for a couple months until Baoshan Sanren found me, and she's raised me ever since. I grew up on her mountain with Xiao Xingchen and I've spent my life coming and going from the mountain even though immortals' disciples really aren't supposed to do that. I've been sneaking into Cloud Recesses to deliver letters from Aunt Baoshan to Aunt Yi for years and the night you caught me, that's what I was doing. My father was a Jiang but the first time I'd met a Jiang was Yanli-jie when you called her to verify my story. I thought this was just going to be a quick stop for me until I could figure out a way to leave without getting Yanli-jie in trouble, but that changed. I don't have to leave and hide away again. I'm staying."

He knows all this already, but that's not the point.

Wei Ying swallows. "I'm not lying anymore."

"I know," he says, not sure where to go from here. Wei Ying had a good reason to lie. He's not upset about it. He wants to know everything about Wei Ying's life, wants to hear about growing up with Baoshan Sanren and Xiao Xingchen and everything that Lan Yi has ever told him. But he doesn't need that. He trusts Wei Ying, and he was right to do so.

"I'm not lying anymore," he repeats. "Lan Zhan. I thought I was going to have to disappear back up the mountain with Aunt Baoshan, but now I don't have to, and Lotus Pier isn't all that far away from Cloud Recesses, comparatively."

He's not sure where Wei Ying is going with this, but he's clearly nervous, so he just confirms, "It's not."

Maybe they can see each other sometimes.

“I like you,” Wei Ying says.

Lan Wangji stares.

“Oh,” he says. If he can talk, he’s still breathing, which is useful information.

Wei Ying’s face falls, which is terrible. He looks warm and comfortable and Lan Wangji wants to touch him.

Wei Ying likes him.

He closes the distance between them, lifting his hand fit the curve of Wei Ying’s cheek in his palm. Wei Ying leans into him and tilts his head in a way Lan Wangji has dreamed bout.

Wei Ying likes him.

Lan Wangji leans even closer, tentatively pressing their lips together, and feels his heart leap into his throat when Wei Ying grabs his waist and tries to pull him impossibly closer.

Wei Ying likes him.

This has been a perfect summer.

He can’t wait for the next one.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you liked it!

jzx insists on marrying jyl over his father's protests and jin ling wields his mother's sword when he's older

xiao xingchen and song lan start their own sect on baoshan sanren's mountain. wen qing bullies and prods and pleads baoshan sanren to teach her what she knows of medical cultivation in return for helping xiao xingchen establish his sect

meng yao marries nie mingjue and spends about a year enduring lan xichen's heartbreak before convincing his husband that no, really, his best friend really does want to sleep with them

wwx and lwj get married and split their time between their clans, making a nuisance of themselves with the lan and jiang, and traveling with lan yi and baoshan sanren

and everyone lives happily ever after

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